

INWARD WORK FOR OUTWARD LIVING

2023

Lenten Devotions

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THE PRESBYTERIAN OUTLOOK

Introduction

MAY GOD BLESS YOU
AND KEEP YOU
ON YOUR LENTEN
JOURNEY.



Meditation, contemplation, centering prayer or examen can all feel like a waste of time — especially when our to-do lists are long and productivity is king. But we shouldn't devalue the beneficial interior work these spiritual practices promote. Lent presents us with an opportunity to slow and listen for the still small voice of God.

At the college where I served as chaplain, I learned students were interested in mindfulness. Although I'd only dabbled with mindfulness meditation, as I have with many spiritual practices, there was no one else to help me meet this student need. So I decided to give it a try, starting a meditation group on Friday afternoons.

At first it was slow going. Few students came and I didn't really know what I was doing. Sitting together in silent meditation was more awkward than helpful. Growing frustrated, I told myself I needed to do better by my students. So I dug in and dedicated myself to the group. I read some books, reviewed online resources and began meditating every morning on my own.

As I practiced meditating, I began to learn about myself. Sitting in silence, focused on my breath, I could note my stressors: where I held them tightly in my body and, eventually, what triggered them. I discovered I could free myself from some of the tension of stress through breathing exercises. I grew to love praying without words, centering an image of God in my mind, visualizing myself soaking in the warmth of God's love like sunbeams breaking through the clouds of a brilliantly blue sky.

The most fascinating part of my personal practice was how it transformed the Friday afternoon group. More and more students were drawn to sit with me for prayer and meditation. There was a clear connection between my interior spiritual work and the way my students were attracted to what I offered. The more internal, spiritual work I did, the more I grew in awareness about who I am and who God is with me, the better I lived outwardly in mission and ministry.

In his book, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*, Richard J. Foster writes that the Latin examen refers to a weight on a balance scale, conveying the idea of an accurate assessment of a situation. This accurate assessment is the heart of Ignatius of Loyola's five-step daily prayer of examen one practices to honestly reflect on your day before God.

These daily Lent devotions will combine the practices of examen – honest assessment and reflection – with meditation, visualization and short prayers. The prayers can be used as mantras or breath prayers: breathe in praying the first phrase, breathe out praying the last. Through this interior work, I pray you also notice the benefits in your outward life — how you carry yourself, how you interact with others, how you can remain soft and still in a chaotic and hard world.



INWARD WORK FOR OUTWARD LIVING

Examining our fear to live with faith



FEB. 26: *Sunday* FEAR OF THE FUTURE

“For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.” (Jeremiah 29:11)

God knows. God plans. God desires a future for us free from harm. Yet, still we fear what might come and what we can't control. What tragedy will strike tomorrow? What awfulness lies ahead for those I love? The world is full of despair. Surely we can't steer ourselves clear. Surely God can't protect us from every harm.

Our faith calls us to trust God today, not fear for tomorrow. In this moment there is reason to rejoice. The sky is a radiant blue, filled with a bright hopeful sun. Flower bulbs wait eagerly beneath the earth preparing to break through the soil to delight us and the pollinating butterflies with colorful blooms.

Our lungs expand and contract with each blessed breath. Our hearts beat a steady rhythm in our chests. In this moment we are free to love and be loved.

Do not allow fear to taint this present moment, diverting our attention from that which is good and beautiful and worth cherishing. Trust what God desires for the future so we can live fully and faithfully in the present.

EXAMEN:

Sit with your fear of the future. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise.

IMAGINE:

Imagine God speaking to you as a prophet, telling you about your future free from harm, a future full of hope. Picture this future. Allow yourself to feel the hope God promises.

PRAY:

Free me from fear, O God, so I can live with faith. Amen.

Examining our fear to live with faith



FEB. 27: *Monday* FEAR OF LOSS

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” (Psalm 23:1)

What are you afraid to lose?

Your job? Your comfort? Your reputation? Your lifestyle? Your friends or family members? Your marriage? Your money? Your health?

Do we fear loss more when we have much to lose?

The psalmist trusts God will provide for his needs, like the shepherd provides for his sheep. Needs are, of course, different from wants. We may want a juicy hamburger, but we need whatever will satiate our hunger and nourish our body. God has provided for our needs through God’s good creation. There are enough food, water and sheltering resources for everyone to have enough. But greed and fear of loss drive many to hoard more than their share.

Loss is inevitable in life. We cycle through endings and beginnings, death and resurrection. But we do not journey through these seasons or cycles alone; we do not grieve our losses without our shepherd’s love and support. Our fear of loss need not keep us from claiming all that God offers to move forward in faith — or loosening our grip to share our abundance.

EXAMEN:

Sit with your fear of loss. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise.

IMAGINE:

Imagine God sitting next to you as a shepherd. Notice how your shepherd has provided all you need. Allow yourself to feel satisfied and safe. Allow yourself to let go of your fear of loss.

PRAY:

Free me from fear, O God, so I can live with faith. Amen.

Examining our fear to live with faith



FEB. 28: *Tuesday* FEAR OF DEATH

“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor power, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”
(Romans 8: 38-39)

This scripture is often read at gravesides and funeral services because it’s such a comfort to those grieving. Although we are separated by death from our loved one, it’s comforting to hear and know they are not separated from God. We need this comfort.

Death, as the ultimate ending, is also the ultimate unknown. Images of pearly gates, streets paved with gold and angels singing while strumming harps proliferate our conception of the next life. But no one comes back to report. Is death painful? Will we miss our loved ones and our lives? Will we carry the love we knew in this life into the next? No matter how the specifics shake out, God’s promises remain sure and steady. We do not face death alone. Nothing will separate us from God’s love. We can let go of this life with faith that God will never let us go.

EXAMEN:

Sit with your fear of death. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise.

IMAGINE:

Imagine yourself passing into the next life. Visualize strolling along a forest trail that connects this life to the next. How is God present with you on this journey? Is God your companion along the trail? Or the sun peeking between the leaves of the forest’s canopy? Or the solid earth beneath your feet? Or the fragrance of wildflowers up ahead?

PRAY:

Free me from fear, O God, so I can live with faith.

Examining our fear to live with faith



MAR. 1: *Wednesday* **FEAR FOR OTHERS**

“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts our fear.” (1 John 4:18a)

I fear for others more than for myself. I fear for my husband’s safety when he travels. I fear for my children as I send them off to school, picturing the latest lockdown drill becoming a necessary reality. I fear for my parents as a hurricane barrels towards Florida. Fear rises also for innocent lives in peril. As Russian bombs fall on Ukraine, I fear for this struggling country’s people. How much more can they withstand? As Kim Jong-Un tests another nuclear warhead, I fear for those who must live with him and near him. As the young women of Iran flood the streets in protest, I fear the Islamic Republic’s response.

Fear is easy to come by these days. 1 John suggests love as the balm. Love has the power to cast out fear, according to the author of this epistle. When I travel, I feel my husband’s love traveling with me as I text him updates: “On the plane.” “Landed in Houston.” “At my hotel.” His love and desire for my safety follows me. Can I trust the same when he travels? Instead of picturing accidents and danger, can I picture him surrounded in love?

Earlier in 1 John 4 we read “God is love.” When we send our love to others, we send them God. When I intentionally pause in the morning before school to look into my kids’ eyes and say, “I love you” I may still worry, but I will have sent them with all the assurances love and God provide.



EXAMEN:

Sit with your fear for others. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise.



IMAGINE:

Imagine God’s love above you like the sun. Can you feel its warmth? Visualize God’s love moving through you, consuming and casting out your fear.



PRAY:

Free me from fear, O God, so I can live with faith.

Examining our fear to live with faith



MAR. 2: *Thursday* FEAR OF OTHERS

“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” (Hebrews 13:2)

In the Bible, angels appear to deliver divine messages or serve as God’s representatives. They announce and proclaim good news of great joy while also terrifying the hardiest shepherds, used to protecting their flock from wild animals prowling at night. (Luke 2:9)

Our first response to someone we don’t know or don’t understand is often fear. Unhelpful stereotypes and myths fan the flames of prejudice to consume our bodies, psyches and our social structures. We have inherited many of these prejudices — taught to us by our White supremacist culture. A White woman goes rigid and tense as a Black man walks by, embodying her fear of him as angry and dangerous. A Latina woman is devalued and held back at work because her supervisor fears she is less dependable and less professional than her White peers. A bearded and turbaned Sikh man is stopped and searched because airport security fears he is a terrorist.

Our fear of others keeps us from entertaining angels, messengers of God who might not look or act like us, but have divine gifts. Releasing the weight and tension of fear allows us to cross boundaries of difference, challenge prejudice and deconstruct biases. It will take a lifetime of intentional and honest interior work to free ourselves from the barriers of fear. But it is worth it to receive the good news God’s angels offer from their new, diverse perspectives.



EXAMEN:

Sit with your fear of others. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise.



IMAGINE:

Call someone you fear to mind. Imagine this person surrounded by the light of God’s angels. Imagine the person is speaking to you, bringing you a divine message. What do you hear?



PRAY:

Free me from fear, O God, so I can live with faith.

Examining our fear to live with faith



MAR. 3: *Friday* FEAR OF FAILURE

“Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.” (Isaiah 41:10)

Failure is a universal experience. I fail my spouse or my children when I get tired and speak too sharply. I fail myself when I don't live by my values, when I respond to ugly with ugly or fail to love my neighbor who is in need. I fail my God when I excuse myself from the discomfort of Christ's call, or when I tell God “I can't” when I haven't even tried.

What would you try if you knew you couldn't fail? What boundary would you cross? What wall would you attempt to break down? What star would you reach for if your fear of failure weren't inhibiting you? How would you define those successes? Take some time to answer these questions. Make a long list.

Fear of failure constricts our lives and keeps us small. We learn and grow from the stumbles we make along the way. When we push past our fear of failure, oftentimes we realize the tragedy isn't in failing, but in never trying.

EXAMEN:

Sit with your fear of failure. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise.

IMAGINE:

Imagine you are climbing a huge mountain — it's so tall you can't see the top. People are streaming down the mountain who did not make it to the top. They tell you not to try the climb. It's impossible. You will certainly fail. But God is with you, strengthening you, helping you, holding your hand. Will you go with God?

PRAY:

Free me from fear, O God, so I can live with faith. Amen.

Examining our fear to live with faith



MAR. 4: *Saturday* FEAR OF GOD

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.” (Proverbs 1:7a)

This week’s devotions wouldn’t be complete without contemplating our fear of God. The Hebrew word *yirah* can be translated as fear, but also awe, respect or reverence. *Yirah* is a worshipful posture before God. To fear God means we understand who God is and who we are in relationship to God. To know we are not the Divine — a tragic misjudgment humans often make.

As we hear stories about soldiers raping and pillaging innocents and torturing prisoners of war, about nations proliferating nuclear weapons, about extremists and racists elected to powerful political positions, about the lack of will to protect our degrading environment, a little more fear of the Lord would serve us well.

The more humans contemplate our humble position before God, the better. We need reminders that the world does not center around us and our immediate needs. We are one small part of God’s great and glorious creation.

Such a posture, such fear of God, can also be incredibly comforting. To know we are not in control, to believe our benevolent Creator desires a future for us free of harm, can bring us great peace. To understand our place before God and to assume a posture of reverence, respect and fear, is, according to Proverbs, the beginning of all knowledge. We would be wise to pray to be filled by this fear, not freed.

EXAMEN:

Sit with your fear of God. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise.

IMAGINE:

Imagine you have been granted an audience with God, like Job. What does it feel like to be in God’s presence? Who are you in relationship to God? How can you worship God in this moment?

PRAY:

Fill me with fear of you, O God, so I can live with faith.

Examining our pain to live with healing



MAR. 5: *Sunday* PAIN OF SHAME

“But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.” (Isaiah 43:1)

Brené Brown is known for her research on shame, which she says is different than guilt. Guilt, she writes, can be understood as, “I did something bad.” Shame, on the other hand, is, “I am bad.”

How often we take mistakes and failings to the extreme! If I preach a sermon that doesn’t land, suddenly I am a terrible preacher. If I fail to meet an aspirational goal – lose that last five pounds, finish that project before vacation, practice a digital fast from social media – I am a failure.

Shame is a powerful and painful emotion that inhibits authentic living and creative work. Because shame is rooted in our fear of being wrong, or being belittled as less than, it stunts all forms of innovation and holds us, our churches, our organizations back. “When our self-worth isn’t on the line,” writes Brown, “we are far more willing to be courageous and risk sharing our raw talents and gifts.

Shame also doesn’t honor the One who created, called and claimed us. We are worthy of God’s love and redemption; we must not let our shame messages tell us otherwise.



EXAMEN:

Listen to the shame messages you have heard or told yourself. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise.



IMAGINE:

Imagine yourself being pieced together in your mother’s womb. Picture God smiling over your birth and cradling you in Divine arms. Bask in the knowledge that you have been claimed by God and blessed as worthy of love.



PRAY:

Free me from pain, O God, so I can live with healing.

Examining our pain to live with healing



MAR. 6: *Monday* PAIN OF GUILT

“For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what zeal, what punishment! At every point you have proved yourselves guiltless in the matter.”
(2 Corinthians 7:11)

Paul speaks of guilt, or “godly grief,” as motivation to restore and mend relationships broken by bad behavior. Reconciliation is a theme of 2 Corinthians. The Christians in this community were eager to mend their relationship with Paul after a painful incident where his honor and reputation were publicly insulted. Paul forgives them, absolving them of guilt and reconciling their relationship.

Guilt often lingers long after confessions are made and forgiveness offered. When I think back to words I said that caused hurt or harm, or ways I’ve behaved that undercut the values I seek to live by, I feel a hot tweak in my chest, a biting constriction that reveals guilt’s powerful and long-lasting hold. Releasing ourselves from guilt’s grip is onerous. It’s almost easier to wallow, swimming in this painful place like a Labrador circling a pond for a sunken toy. Words recognizing our amends or apologies and gestures of forgiveness from others are welcome and reassuring. But freedom comes not just from accepting forgiveness from others, but also forgiving ourselves.

EXAMEN:

Sit with your guilt over past mistakes. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise.

IMAGINE:

Imagine you are carrying a number of large rocks, each representing a past mistake. Allow yourself to feel the weight of these rocks, how they slow you down and exhaust you. In the name of Jesus Christ, we are forgiven. Visualize yourself setting each rock down as you repeat to yourself, “I am forgiven. I am forgiven. I am forgiven.” Feel your burden of guilt lighten and release.

PRAY:

Free me from pain, O God, so I can live with healing.

Examining our pain to live with healing



MAR. 7: Tuesday PAIN OF TRAUMA

*“How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?” (Psalm 13:2)*

In his book, *My Grandmother’s Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*, behavioral therapist Resmaa Menakem writes, “Trauma is the body’s protective response to an event that it perceives as potentially dangerous. We can have a trauma response to anything we perceive as a threat, not only to our physical safety, but to what we do, say, think, care about, believe in, or yearn for.”

In danger’s wake, our brains embed trauma in our bodies, which can manifest for years as pain, fear, anxiety, reactive behaviors, even violence. Trauma remains until it is exposed, named and addressed.

To heal from trauma, our minds and bodies must embrace and experience a sense of safety. We have to disrupt the narrative of threat. The promises of God’s love, grace and provision can serve as our disruptive, healing story. The Easter narrative unfolds a dangerous plot with a brutal death. But life emerges after brutality. Resurrection restores us to healing and hope. God’s love and grace have the last word.

 **EXAMEN:**

Sit with your trauma narratives of threatening danger. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise. Notice your body’s response.

 **IMAGINE:**

Pay attention to your breath, pulled in through your nose, filling your lungs, released through your mouth. Experience the life-giving quality of this breath. Imagine this life-giving oxygen as God’s love surrounding you, within you, flowing through every deeply held trauma. God’s love protects and provides for you. Feel God’s embrace. Relax in this space of safety.

 **PRAY:**

Free me from pain, O God, so I can live with healing.

Examining our pain to live with healing



MAR. 8: *Wednesday* **PAIN OF VIOLENCE**

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” (Matthew 5:9)

Violence pervades our lives and distorts God’s kin-dom plans. The war in Ukraine reveals the consequences of violence on a global scale. But violence takes many forms: any behavior intended to hurt, damage or kill. Physical, psychological, spiritual and verbal abuse, bullying, economic and social violence all send shock waves of pain and destruction through bodies, souls, peoples, countries and our natural environment.

Our bodies release adrenaline and cortisol during conflict, tempting us to fight violence with violence. It’s important to acknowledge how this momentary surge of power can feel good. But our fight response also fans the flames of conflict, moving us farther from peace.

Violence demeans both victim and victimizer; its injuries not just of the flesh, but of the spirit and soul. The children of God are peacemakers who follow a crucified God. Christ did not meet violence with more violence. He resisted violence with that which is more powerful: love.

 **EXAMEN:**

Sit with the pain of violence. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise. Notice your body’s response.

 **IMAGINE:**

Picture Jesus with you, saying these words: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.” (John 14:27) Breathe in Christ’s peace, breath out the pain of violence. Repeat.

 **PRAY:**

Free me from pain, O God, so I can live with healing.

Examining our pain to live with healing



MAR. 9: *Thursday* PAIN OF BETRAYAL

“Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.” (Psalm 139:7-10)

The pain of betrayal is particularly hard to understand. It’s the opposite of what you thought was true.

You thought someone was your friend. You believed promises wouldn’t be broken. You expected trust to be reciprocated. Betrayal leaves us reeling, wondering what is real.

People can and will betray us. The scriptures are full of stories of broken promises, abandonment, lying, disrespect, and unfairness. Betrayal has residual effects — we become more cautious, less open-hearted, hesitant to trust. In these moments, we can lean into the comfort our God provides. No matter where we go, no matter what happens to us, our God is present and our Creator’s faithfulness steadfast and ever-present.

We can trust God’s promises; this love will never turn on us.



EXAMEN:

Sit with a memory of betrayal. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise. Notice your body’s response.



IMAGINE:

Imagine the earth is shaking all around you. God is with you, holding your hand, guiding you down a steady path. Feel the firm grip of God’s hand in yours. Feel the solid ground beneath your feet. Allow yourself to relax into and trust God’s faithful support.



PRAY:

Free me from pain, O God, so I can live with healing.

Examining our pain to live with healing



MAR. 10: *Friday* PAIN OF HUMILIATION

*“The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit.”
(Psalm 34:18)*

Do you remember middle school? Does anyone survive those awkward years without a good dose of humiliation? Middle school is a Petri dish of peer pressure where anything you say or do can be used against you.

Humiliation is more painful than we realize. Researchers have discovered that the same regions of the brain active during physical pain are also activated during intense experiences of social rejection. Don't we all have memories of social rejection, painful put-downs, or public call outs, that still make us wince? Humiliating others is too often celebrated in our social media culture where missteps can go viral and cyber bullying is a real threat. Spirits can be crushed by such tactics, but God draws near to mend and heal our brokenness.

 **EXAMEN:**

Sit with a memory of humiliation. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise. Notice your body's response.

 **IMAGINE:**

Imagine God drawing near to you in that moment of humiliation, scattering your assailing enemies. Like a puzzle whose pieces have scattered across the floor, God gathers the broken pieces of you, puts you back together, and restores you to wholeness.

 **PRAY:**

Free me from pain, O God, so I can live with healing.

Examining our pain to live with healing



MAR. 11: *Saturday* PAIN OF LOSS

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.” (Matthew 5:4)

Grief is a pain we all experience; loss a natural cycle of life marked by endings and beginnings. We might grieve the loss of certain periods of time — our youth, our college years, the end of a wonderful vacation. We might grieve the loss of important places — our childhood home, a community in which we felt welcome, a place where we experienced personal growth. We might grieve the loss of meaningful things — our first car, old photographs, a treasured piece of art. But death, of course, brings the most poignant pain.

The poet Marie Howe describes her brother’s death as a making of space, a gate through which she, too, would eventually pass. Her brother’s body was taller, she writes, and younger, “done at twenty-eight.” The pain of Howe’s loss is palpable.

In the midst of the pain of loss, God shows up. God is present as Alpha and Omega, beginning and end. With each ending, God promises a new beginning, for those lost and those left behind. People aren’t replaceable. But love remains no matter which side of the gate we stand on.

EXAMEN:

Sit with your feelings of loss. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise. Notice your body’s response.

IMAGINE:

Imagine yourself before a gate. On the other side of the gate you see the person, place, experience for which you mourn. Picture your loss shining with vibrant joy. Feel the love passing back and forth between the gate. Visualize your emptiness being filled with this love.

PRAY:

Free me from pain, O God, so I can live with healing.

Examining our joy to live with gratitude



MAR. 12: *Sunday* JOY OF NATURE

“For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.”
(Isaiah 55:12)

In her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Indigenous scientist Robin Wall Kimmerer tells the story of a plant scientist who hired an Indigenous guide to help him explore the rainforest for new botanical discoveries. The young guide is thorough, taking care to point out the most interesting species and surprising the scientist with his capacity. “Well, well, young man, you certainly know the names of a lot of these plants.” The guide nods, then responds with downcast eyes. “Yes, I have learned the names of all the bushes, but I have yet to learn their songs.”

A walk or a hike through nature is oftentimes all we need to calm our nervous system, to clear our heads, to embrace the gifts of beauty and grace God desires to bestow. Venturing into the woods, away from the sounds of human civilization grants us the quiet we need to hear nature’s song — warbling birds, vibrating insects, the call of animals for food or mating or warning or sheer joy. When we take the time to meditate among nature, it’s as if God’s creation stands in applause. Yes! Yes! the trees shout, their leaves whistling and clapping in the wind. Yes! This is the joy that has been here for you all along.

EXAMEN:

Recall the last time you walked among nature. What led you there? What songs did you hear? Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise.

IMAGINE:

Imagine yourself walking along a mountainous wooded trail far from home, work, all the responsibilities of life. It’s just you alone in nature. What do you hear? What do you smell? What rhythms of nature can you feel outside you? Inside you? Embrace this moment of joy and praise.

PRAY:

Free me for joy, O God, so I can live with gratitude.

Examining our joy to live with gratitude



MAR. 13: *Monday* JOY OF CHILDREN

“Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 18:3)

Over a lunch of hot dogs and mashed potatoes, our 3-year-old son said, “Look Mommy, I’m putting on my sunblock so I won’t get a sunburn.”

“Mmm-hmm, that’s nice, honey,” I responded, lost in my thoughts about work and responsibilities.

He said it again, insisting on my attention. “Mommy, look, I’m putting on my sun block so I won’t get a sunburn.” This time I heard the excited joy in his voice. I looked. My grinning, gleeful child had smeared ketchup all over his face, legs, and neck — the parts of him most likely to burn in the sun.

I couldn’t help but join him in his joy.

God does not desire us to live dour lives. Spending time with children reveals that the potential for joy is all around us. Look! they say, inviting us to share in their joy. If we adults can get out of our heads, pay attention, and become like children, our lives will be graced with abundant joy as well.

 **EXAMEN:**

Remember yourself as a child at play. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise.

 **IMAGINE:**

Imagine you have nothing to do today, no responsibilities, no chores. What will you do for play? What joy do you discover when you free yourself to become like a child?

 **PRAY:**

Free me for joy, O God, so I can live with gratitude.

Examining our joy to live with gratitude



MAR. 14: *Tuesday* JOY OF LAUGHTER

"Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth." (Psalm 98:4)

"People crave laughter as if it were an essential amino acid." Robin Williams said, playing Patch Adams in the 1998 hit movie. Based on the true story of Hunter "Patch" Adams, the movie champions an approach to healing that treats the person, not just the disease. "Remember laughing?" Adams asks in the movie, dressed as a clown as he visits children and gets even the most disgruntled patient giggling. "Laughter releases endorphins and other natural mood elevating and pain-killing chemicals. Laughter boosts the immune system and helps the body fight off disease. Being happy is the best cure of all diseases!"

Laughter is the best, most joyous noise: cackling, uncontrolled snorting, deep belly guffaws, silly giggles, screaming or squealing in delight. Do you remember getting the giggles when you were supposed to be quiet? How hard it was to subdue that laughter? Laughter will seek every means of escape. It's a joy that's not meant to be held back. And its release is the most freeing of feelings! So marvelous it might even bring tears to our eyes, a physical cleansing from the inside out. Breaking out in loud, joyous laughter is like taking off a dress or a pair of pants you've worn all day that are just a little too tight. Ah, yes! What joy! What freedom! What freedom! Make a joyful noise! Let it out! Let loose with laughter.

EXAMEN:

Recall a scene, a memory, something someone said, that made you laugh out loud in joy. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise.

IMAGINE:

Imagine yourself surrounded by your dearest friends, the ones who can always make you laugh. Notice the sensations in your body as you recall the joy of laughter. From where in your body does the laughter come? To where does it travel? What is loosened as you laugh? What is set free?

PRAY:

Free me for joy, O God, so I can live with gratitude.

Examining our joy to live with gratitude



MAR. 15: *Wednesday* JOY OF FRIENDSHIP

“Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other.” (Ecclesiastes 4:9-10)

When I recently moved to a new state and community, I knew I needed to be intentional about making new friends. I’d left behind a relationship with a mother whose kids and career closely matched my own. We’d meet for long walks with our dogs, circling our neighborhood to let out our frustrations, share our joys and news. I miss this friend and our walks.

Finding and making friends grows more difficult as you get older. Our school years are the best for making friends. I have loved watching my kids find and make friends in school, witnessing them learn how to be good friends — sharing trust, kindness and common interests. I smile listening to my daughter’s silly giggles from her bedroom as she talks to her friends on the phone.

In my new community, I invited an older, retired woman out for coffee. I shared a love of books with this older woman and we made each other laugh — a good sign. We talked for two hours about the books we’d read, our lives and our careers, while ignoring the cold, empty coffee cups before us. Finally, when we decided it was time to part, she teared up. She’d needed and been looking for a friend, as had I. Her tears were tears of joy.

Friendships don’t require that people be in the same stage of life — that’s their beauty. They only require the spark of connection, common interests, a mutual desire to grow in relationship and share joy.

EXAMEN:

Recall a friendship you treasure. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise.

IMAGINE:

Imagine yourself walking and talking with a treasured friend. Notice the ease of your relationship. Notice what you share, how you feel with the person, who you are together as you walk. Embrace the joy this relationship offers.

PRAY:

Free me for joy, O God, so I can live with gratitude.

Examining our joy to live with gratitude



MAR. 16: *Thursday* JOY OF GIVING

“Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” (2 Corinthians 9:7)

I’ve attended a number of parties where a gift exchange game is played. Recently, I attended one where we all brought a wrapped book. One person chooses a gift to open. The next person can choose another gift or steal one already opened. No matter who I play this game with – children, grandmothers, Presbyterians, pacifists – it always gets competitive. People strategize, form alliances and steal the gifts they desire. Some bring gag gifts to throw in the mix. The poor soul who opened *How to Win Friends and Influence People* couldn’t get rid of that book no matter how hard she tried. No matter what gift you end the game with, though, joy resounds in the giving and receiving — and even the thieving.

The gesture of gift giving is meant to elicit joy. We watch the person unwrap what we have wrapped, waiting – hoping – for a smile. A little, “Oh!” of joyful surprise and exclamation is especially good. For occasions such as Christmas and birthdays and parties, where gifts might be expected, the surprise is harder to pull off. I love watching talk shows when an unsuspecting-but-deserving audience member is surprised with a gift — a new car! A college scholarship! Joy. Pure joy.

We all have gifts to give. Take some time today to remember how good it feels, how joyous, to share these gifts with others.

EXAMEN:

Recall a treasured gift you received. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise.

IMAGINE:

Imagine yourself giving a treasured gift to a friend, family member, maybe even a stranger on the street. How does it feel to have a gift to share? How does the gesture of giving make you feel? Embrace the joy inherent in giving.

PRAY:

Free me for joy, O God, so I can live with gratitude.

Examining our joy to live with gratitude



MAR. 17: *Friday* JOY OF DANCING

“David danced before the Lord with all his might.” (2 Samuel 6:14)

Some time ago, a video of the late Congressman John Lewis dancing to Pharrell Williams’ hit song “Happy” went viral. The encouraging voice behind the camera called, “C’mon, break it down, Congressman,” as Lewis shook, swayed, and clapped his hands to the beat. “Mm. This is my song,” he said. Then, “I could do this better if I had a drink.” Ha! What joy.

I admire people who can dance well, who know how to move their body with precision and a kind of coordination for which I can only dream. I watch shows like “Dancing with the Stars” and “So You Think You Can Dance” and marvel at what movement is possible. To the utter embarrassment of my teenagers, I dance — when a good song starts playing in my earbuds, or a small, safe, seat-dance in the car, or at a relative’s wedding. Dancing is joy set to movement, even if you’re not particularly coordinated.

David danced before the Ark of the Covenant (God’s house) as it was carried into Jerusalem, among shouts of joy and the sound of trumpets. The ark had been captured by the Philistines and eventually made its way to the house of Abinadab, the son of King Saul, but remained outside Jerusalem. David succeeded King Saul and, moving the ark back to Jerusalem, restored the city as Israel’s religious center. David’s joy over this move manifested in leaping and dancing as he praised his God.

EXAMEN:

When was the last time you felt like dancing? Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise.

IMAGINE:

Imagine yourself at your best friend’s wedding where you are pulled onto the dance floor. What would happen if you let go of inhibition and let your body loose? What would that feel like? What music would be playing? What fun would you have? What keeps you from experiencing this bodily joy?

PRAY:

Free me for joy, O God, so I can live with gratitude.

Examining our joy to live with gratitude

MAR. 18: *Saturday* JOY OF NEWNESS

“So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Corinthians 5:17)

Madeline was a precocious, curly-haired 3-year-old who couldn't stand or sit still. I had no idea how her baptism would go. But if the rehearsal was any indication, this sacramental moment would be a challenge. Neither I, nor Madeline's parents, could convince her to stay still long enough to get the water sprinkled on her head. Madeline was more interested in rolling under church pews and running up and down the burgundy carpeted aisles.

When the time came for her actual baptism, Madeline's father brought her forward holding her squirming body tight in his arms — his face determined. We would get this blessed child baptized! I rushed through the liturgy as fast as I appropriately could. Madeline's parents and her church family promised to encourage, guide and nurture her in following Christ. I removed the lid from the font and dipped my hand. Then, a miracle occurred. Madeline, her eyes widening in wonder, stopped wiggling and grew still. Placing my wet hand on top of her head, I recited the baptismal liturgy: “Madeline, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Child of the covenant, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever.” Madeline, still quiet, gave me a small, affirmative nod, as I concluded, “Amen.”

It is a wonder what happens to us in Jesus Christ. Through the waters of baptism, we die to our old selves and arise as new creations, our lives dedicated to the One who claims and calls us. Our lives transformed by a covenant of love.

EXAMEN:

Do you remember your baptism? Or the baptism of a friend or family member? Recall the scene. The words of liturgy said. The promises made. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise.

IMAGINE:

Imagine Jesus leading you into the river Jordan. He leans you back to immerse you, the water closing over your face and rushing past your ears. Jesus quickly lifts you up, out of the water, wet, cold and gasping as you hear the words, “Child of the covenant, sealed by the waters of baptism, you are Christ's own forever.” What does newness in Christ feel like?

PRAY:

Free me for joy, O God, so I can live with gratitude.

Examining our dishonesty to live with truth



MAR. 19: *Sunday* DISHONEST ABOUT OUR DECEIT

“If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.”
(1 John 1:8)

God will not allow us to feel right when we do wrong. Our souls suffer, our spirits are diminished, our God-given potential stunted when we deceive ourselves and the truth is not within us. The lies we tell ourselves often perpetuate sins of domination — that we are of a superior race; that our violence is noble; that women are inferior to men; that our exclusion and judgment of others is justified; that God is on our side, our team, our nation, our cause. We easily manipulate and distort the truth to our benefit and the benefit of our people. Crusaders and colonizers committed atrocious sins that we must still confess, because many of us still benefit from the spoils of this “justified” violence.

Convincing ourselves that our lies are God’s truth is a dangerous and deadly game. Our minds run on overdrive, performing mental calisthenics, seeking reasons to justify our beliefs and actions that are not of God. Living a lie is exhausting, life-draining, soul-sucking. The truth will set us free. Let us not deceive ourselves, but lean into the truth, confess our sins, and return to God’s path of justice and righteousness.

EXAMEN:

In what ways have you been deceptive or dishonest with others? With yourself? With God? Sit with this dishonesty. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise.

IMAGINE:

Imagine yourself at the feet of God, ready to confess your deceit and live into the truth of who you are. What will you say here before God? What burden will you let go to release this deception from your heart, mind and soul?

PRAY:

Free me from dishonesty, O God, so I can live with truth.

Examining our dishonesty to live with truth



MAR. 20: Monday **DISHONEST ABOUT OUR ABILITIES**

“But Moses said to the Lord, ‘O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.’” (Exodus 4:10)

Oftentimes, when God calls, our default response is “I can’t,” when the more honest response would be “I won’t” or “I don’t want to.” Sometimes this dishonesty springs from fear, when we use our abilities, or lack thereof, as an excuse to not follow God and respond to our Creator’s call. But our faith calls us to trust not only the abilities God gives us, but also our Creator’s role in nurturing those gifts.

In response to Moses’ excuse – that he has never been eloquent – God reminds him that all our abilities come from our Creator. “Who gives speech to mortals?” God says to Moses. “Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak.”

No one is born a great orator. Those gifts evolve with practice, guidance and faith in a God who nurtures our potential for kin-dom work. Each of us is equipped with gifts to develop and share. Each of us has a role to play in transforming God’s vision into an earthly reality. There can be no dishonesty before God, because our Creator knows what we are capable of.

EXAMEN:

In what ways have you been dishonest about your abundance? Sit with this dishonesty. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise.

IMAGINE:

Imagine yourself as a disciple being called by Jesus to feed a hungry crowd of people. What resources do you have, or could you call upon, to feed the crowd’s physical, spiritual or emotional hunger? Be honest with Jesus and yourself in this moment. Let go of every dishonest excuse.

PRAY:

Free me from dishonesty, O God, so I can live with truth.

Examining our dishonesty to live with truth



MAR. 21: : *Tuesday* DISHONEST ABOUT OUR ABUNDANCE

“[The disciples] said to [Jesus], ‘Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?’ And [Jesus] said to them, ‘How many loaves have you? Go and see.’” (Mark 6:37-38)

How often, it seems, we operate with a script that tells us there just isn’t enough — not enough time, not enough food, not enough money, not enough jobs, not enough alternative sources of energy, maybe even not enough love to conquer the hate, or good to overcome the evil. “How many loaves have you?” Jesus asks the disciples because they hadn’t thought to ask it themselves. God provides an abundance of resources, yet we focus on that which we lack.

Time management guru Laura Vanderkam advises people who feel like they don’t have enough time in the week to track how they spend 168 hours (seven days) to dispel this myth of “not enough.” You have more time than you think, she writes.

We have enough time. We just need to be honest about how we spend the time we have been given. Tracking exercises help us plan for and prioritize our schedules. Budgeting helps us become more aware of money we have to spend and share. Spiritual practices, such as examen, make conscious the unconscious gifts of abundance we have stored up and could freely bestow.

EXAMEN:

In what ways have you been dishonest about your abundance? Sit with this dishonesty. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise.

IMAGINE:

Imagine yourself as a disciple being called by Jesus to feed a hungry crowd of people. What resources do you have, or could you call upon, to feed the crowd’s physical, spiritual or emotional hunger? Be honest with Jesus and yourself in this moment. Let go of every dishonest excuse.

PRAY:

Free me from dishonesty, O God, so I can live with truth.

Examining our dishonesty to live with truth



MAR. 22: *Wednesday* **DISHONEST ABOUT OUR KNOWLEDGE**

“For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face.” (1 Corinthians 13:12)

In his poem, “small talk or in my hand galaxies,” Benjamin Naka-Hasebe Kingsley writes:

how often i have mistaken myself
for the seer for the see-er
and others simply as the seen.

We humans often make the mistake of assuming we know – or even know better – than others. We can be so certain, and yet also so wrong. Once, a man accosted me verbally after hearing me preach. He was certain he knew the Bible better than me, and the Bible was clear that a woman should not be in the pulpit. Another time, I experienced the rush of righteous knowledge as I berated a young conservative student who I understood as wrong in his political views. Yet, the beginning of wisdom is knowing what we don’t know; knowing that we can only see in a mirror, dimly.

Our knowledge is limited and shaped by the people, places, cultures and beliefs with which we surround ourselves. Certainty stunts the growth and expansion of our knowledge. Certainty inspires a kind of divisive arrogance, cutting us off from curious exploration and new discoveries. To honestly acknowledge all we don’t know is to live a life of faithful possibility.

EXAMEN:

In what ways have you been dishonest about your knowledge? Sit with this dishonesty. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise.

IMAGINE:

Imagine yourself before a fogged-up mirror that slowly clears and reveals your image in sharp focus. How do you see yourself anew as the fog clears? What comes into focus? What do you learn from the journey of moving from unclear to clear?

PRAY:

Free me from dishonesty, O God, so I can live with truth.

Examining our dishonesty to live with truth



MAR. 23: *Thursday* DISHONEST ABOUT OUR HISTORY

“If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” (John 8:31-32)

In her book, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, Isabel Wilkerson outlines how the Nazis admired and studied the United States’ near genocide of Native Americans and the use of lynching to terrorize and keep African Americans subdued. Thus, America served as a model for the kind of “racial purification” to which the Nazis aspired.

Reading Debby Irving’s book, *Waking Up White*, I learned how Black veterans of World War II were largely excluded from the benefits of the GI Bill. Though they were technically eligible, our nation’s systems of higher education, housing, and finance in the 1940s and ’50s made it nearly impossible for Black veterans to access the free college tuition and guaranteed home loans that gave White veterans and their families a huge socio-economic boost. White families still enjoy the benefits of inherited wealth spurred by this economic boost.

Some of the racial history I have learned in the past few years – history I was not taught in school – has shaken me to the core. I struggle to hold this knowledge of such monstrous and unjust acts. The truth hurts. But dishonorable history threatens to repeat itself if we cannot face it honestly. The first step towards freeing ourselves from the sins of our past is truthful acknowledgement.

EXAMEN:

What history would you rather not face? What past sins haunt you? Sit with the emotions that arise as you honestly consider this history. Breathe. Free yourself for your future by acknowledging the truth of the past.

IMAGINE:

Imagine yourself reading a big book of your life. As you flip through the pages, allow yourself to remember and recall scenes from your past. Towards the end of the book you come to a number of blank pages. Visualize what future story you want written there.

PRAY:

Free me from dishonesty, O God, so I can live with truth.

Examining our dishonesty to live with truth



MAR. 24: *Friday* **DISHONEST ABOUT OUR STRENGTH**

“I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” (Philippians 4:13)

“All things” is a bit much, don’t you think? It’s like when we tell kids they can do or be anything when they grow up. Dream big! Shoot for the stars! Nothing is impossible! This sounds inspiring – and sometimes we need an encouraging pep talk – but it’s not realistic, or honest. Some things are not right for us. Some things are beyond our limits or out of our control.

Earlier in Philippians, Paul says the strength God provides him is the ability to be content no matter the situation. Whether Paul finds himself having plenty or being in need, he’ll be okay because God gives him strength.

Sometimes we are stronger and more resilient than we think. We might avoid situations that provoke fear or discomfort. We might be quick to say, “I’m not strong enough,” when a more honest response might be, “That looks painful, scary or difficult.” But we grow in strength when we take on new challenges or push ourselves to achieve something we doubted was possible. We don’t know what strength God has given us until we honestly try.

EXAMEN:

What have you not tried or faced because you felt you weren’t strong enough? Sit with this dishonesty. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise.

IMAGINE:

Imagine yourself climbing a mountain with a heavy backpack loaded with burdens. Every step requires effort and energy. Every footfall feels heavier than the last. What strength do you possess to keep moving forward? What is up ahead that motivates you to keep going? Be honest with God and yourself.

PRAY:

Free me from dishonesty, O God, so I can live with truth.

Examining our dishonesty to live with truth



MAR. 25: *Saturday* **DISHONEST ABOUT FOLLOWING CHRIST**

“Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also.”
(John 12:26)

I often wonder about people who speak of Christ as if he is their best friend and greatest comfort.

Are they being honest? Are they reading the Jesus found in the Gospels? Certainly, Christ can be a source of comfort, but we also know him as a perpetual thorn in our side, or a consistent prick of our conscience, or a great disturber of our personal peace. Christ prophetically calls us to follow him to challenging people, places and situations. Following Christ is far from comfortable.

Let’s be honest. Where has Christ called us that we have been unwilling to go? What has he asked us to sacrifice that we are unwilling to give up? Who has Christ called us to love who we are unwilling to embrace? Christ is ready to take us to transformative places that are good for us and for the world. We won’t regret following him, but honesty is required.

EXAMEN:

In what ways have you been dishonest about following Christ? When have you made Jesus into a more palatable, comfortable Savior — a Jesus more suited to your wants and needs? Sit with this dishonesty. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise.

IMAGINE:

Imagine yourself at a crossroads. One road is steep and stony; the other is a pleasant, shaded path. Jesus beckons you to follow him up the hard road. The easy road leads away from him and his path. Take a moment to honestly consider what you gain and what you sacrifice along each road.

PRAY:

Free me from dishonesty, O God, so I can live with truth.

Examining our burdens to live with blessing



MAR. 26: *Sunday* BURDENED BY CYNICISM

“Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.” (Ephesians 4:29)

A man I know, once vibrant and talented, now lives in a family member’s spare bedroom, drinking beer and playing video games all day. His story is tragic. A series of misfortunes knocked him off his trajectory to success and turned him bitterly cynical. Everything and everyone was to blame for his misfortune. No one could stand being around him. He lost job after job and the woman he’d hoped to marry. His cynicism drove everyone away.

Cynicism can be triggered when we are hurt or angered. It’s a defensive posture we take to protect ourselves emotionally — nothing I do will make a difference, so why try? Cynicism can also keep us from dealing with negative emotions in a healthy way, allowing them to fester, grow and distort our view of ourselves, others and the world.

Paul’s letter to the Ephesians reminds us of our call to build each other up, to speak words of grace, compassion and love. This Lent, let us free ourselves from the threat of cynicism by allowing ourselves the grace to examine our emotions in a healthy, up-building manner.

EXAMEN:

Listen to the cynical messages you have heard or told yourself — angry messages of blame and mistrust. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise.

IMAGINE:

Recall a time you expected the worst, a situation you were sure wouldn’t end well. Sit with the painful emotions of doubt, suspicion and mistrust as they arise. Picture these emotions moving through and then out of your body like cloud vapors. Imagine the clouds breaking into tiny bits, angry molecules that catch on the wind and float away. Rest in the release of these emotions. Allow yourself to feel this unburdening.

PRAY:

Free me from this burden, O God, so I can live with your blessing.

Examining our burdens to live with blessing



MAR. 27: *Monday* BURDENED BY ADDICTION

“God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.” (2 Timothy 1:7)

When we hear the word “addiction,” alcohol and drugs come quickly to mind. But any substance, pleasure or means of escape can become an addiction. An addiction is a dependency. The persistent and intense urge to engage in a behavior or consume a substance that causes us immediate or long-term harm. Some substances, such as nicotine, caffeine, cocaine, alcohol and opioids, are designed to get us hooked. But we can also become addicted to sugar, sex, prescription drugs, gambling, even our phones — substances or behaviors that, when abused or used disproportionately, can have severe and harmful consequences.

The God who created us and loves us desires our health and well-being. God also created us with the power to grow in self-discipline. But to break the hold of addiction, we must examine ourselves and our behaviors honestly and seek resources of support and help. We cannot pray our addictions away. But our faith can inspire the humility and honesty required to get the help we need. God does not desire our suffering. We are God’s beloved. God desires our liberation from that which seeks to control and harm us.

EXAMEN:

Consider your cravings. What substance has more control over you than you would like or feels unhealthy? Are there actions you feel compelled to do? Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise as you consider this craving.

IMAGINE:

Imagine access to your drug or addiction has been taken away. What does your dependency feel like? Notice your thoughts, emotions, physical sensations that arise. Attend to these feelings honestly. Don’t seek escape. Embrace these feelings knowing God is with you, encouraging your honest examination. Breathe. Release yourself from the practice. Rest. Reflect on what you learned.

PRAY:

Free me from this burden, O God, so I can live with your blessing.

Examining our burdens to live with blessing



MAR. 28: *Tuesday* BURDENED BY DESPAIR

“And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.” (Isaiah 35:10)

The weight of our world’s news burdens us with despair over the violence of war, rising hate crimes, devastating natural disasters and entrenched political divides. In the introduction to his edited collection *Joy: 100 Poems*, Christian Wiman writes that “joy is the only inoculation against the despair to which any sane person is prone, the only antidote to the nihilism that wafts through our intellectual atmosphere like sarin gas.” Despair is a constant. Joy must be sought.

I’ve often counseled people who are going through difficult times to intentionally seek joy. Observe the majesty of a sunset. Listen to giggling children. Receive a friend’s hug. Offer a random act of kindness. Seek joy, I’ve advised, not to demean or downplay their anguish, but to help them find their way through it. Moments of joy can serve as stepping-stones through the desert of despair.

Isaiah 35:10 describes the Israelites’ return after exile, through the wilderness to the promised land. Unlike their exodus journey, this pilgrimage is marked with rejoicing. The trials of God’s people are not over. The enemies that surround them are real and powerful. But the message of seeking joy during suffering is meaningful no matter where we are on our journey.

EXAMEN:

Sit with your despair. In what ways do you feel powerless? Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise.

IMAGINE:

Imagine yourself walking through a desert of despair. Your journey is long, you are suffering from heat and thirst, the sand burning beneath your feet. Then, imagine desert crocuses blossoming, waters and streams beginning to flow, ready to quench your thirst and the land’s. The burning sands are cooled, leading you to break into a song, or shouts of joy, praising God.

PRAY:

Free me from this burden, O God, so I can live with your blessing.

Examining our burdens to live with blessing



MAR. 29: *Wednesday* BURDENED BY JUDGMENT

“Blessed be the Lord, for he has wondrously shown his steadfast love to me when I was beset as a city under siege.” (Psalm 31:21)

There is a difference between pursuing opportunities for self-growth and subjecting yourself to judgmental self-punishment. I recently watched a video of myself preaching, only to diminish myself with harsh critique. Why did I leave my reading glasses on top of my head? Why can't I stop repeating “Um” and “Like” and making that weird clicking noise with my tongue? After watching this video, my inner critic jumped to exaggerated judgments. You are a terrible preacher, it said. People may have told you they liked what you said, but they were just being polite.

Small, yet relentless, messages of self-judgment are powerful in tearing us down. These messages do not speak truth, though. They exaggerate the worst. And they run counter to the messages God sends us. The psalmist relies on God's steadfast love to bolster him under siege. The way we judge ourselves, exaggerating our faults and failures, can burden us as if we were a city besieged by enemies. In these moments, remember that God created you and loves you. You are God's beloved. You are worthy of love. Fill your head and heart with these messages of steadfast love to free you from the burden of judgment.



EXAMEN:

Recall a recent failure or mistake you made. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise. Notice your body's response.



IMAGINE:

Imagine God's love above you like the sun. Can you feel its warmth? Visualize God's love moving through you, consuming and casting out failure, mistakes and self-judgment. Allow God's love the space to be free-flowing and steadfast.



PRAY:

Free me from this burden, O God, so I can live with your blessing.

Examining our burdens to live with blessing



MAR. 30: Thursday BURDENED BY STUFF

Jesus said to his disciples, "Take nothing for the journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money — not even an extra tunic." (Luke 9:3)

When I travel, I don't pack light. I get a free checked bag with my rewards membership, so I take advantage of the space, packing everything I might need and then some. On my last trip, I even packed my heated blanket, which I love to write under every morning. Did I need the blanket? No. Did I love having my blanket with me? Yes.

Things can bring us comfort and joy. But there comes a point when our stuff burdens and restricts us from living the full and faithful life to which Christ calls. Possessions can become idolatrous — our attachment to them greater than our attachment to God. Our homes, luggage and lives can get so filled with stuff (hello, hoarder!) that we become imprisoned — trapped by the responsibility to care for our stuff, as opposed to caring for others or ourselves.

Marie Kondo, the Home Edit, tiny homes and the minimalist lifestyle are fascinating in their growing popularity. We know the accumulation of more and more stuff isn't good for us. We know we can't take it all with us. Spend some time this Lent considering what you need and what you can let go. Free yourself for the journey.

 **EXAMEN:**

Imagine yourself in a room filled with all your possessions. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise. Notice your body's response.

 **IMAGINE:**

Imagine yourself packing for a trip. You are allowed only one small bag. What will you put in the bag? What are your essentials? How does it feel to travel with such a light load?

 **PRAY:**

Free me from this burden, O God, so I can live with your blessing.

Examining our burdens to live with blessing



MAR. 31: *Friday* BURDENED BY DOUBT

“Immediately the father of the child cried out, ‘I believe; help my unbelief!’”
(Mark 9:24)

Doubt often surfaces when bad things happen to good people. Why, God? we cry, when suffering doesn’t make sense, and calamity doesn’t line up with the God we know and love. Why must the people of Ukraine suffer? Why did that hurricane choose that community to destroy? Why do so many people have to die from COVID-19? Where are you, God, in the midst of all this suffering?

Every faith journey is plagued by doubt. Without doubt, it isn’t much of a journey. Challenge breeds growth. Questioning leads to discoveries. At times, God feels distant and vague. Other times, God’s presence is obvious — thick and intimate, dispelling all our doubts. Is this some sort of divine trickery? What is real? What is true?

In her poem, “The World I Live In,” Mary Oliver writes about how she refuses to live in “the orderly house of reasons and proofs.” The world in which she lives and believes is “wider than that. And anyway,” she concludes, “what’s wrong with Maybe?”

“Maybe” leaves the door of our house open to all that is possible with God. “Maybe” acknowledges our doubt, without losing our faith.



EXAMEN:

Recall a moment or a question of doubt in your journey of faith. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise. Notice your body’s response.



IMAGINE:

Imagine yourself knocking on a closed door. You are seeking the person and the knowledge held in that house. The door opens a crack and gives you a glimpse at the beauty, meaning and purpose that lies inside. Absorb all that this glimpse has to offer. Allow this glimpse to fuel your faith.



PRAY:

Free me from this burden, O God, so I can live with your blessing.

Examining our burdens to live with blessing



APR. 1: *Saturday* BURDENED BY RESPONSIBILITIES

“And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done.” (Genesis 2:2)

When I start to feel burdened or overwhelmed by my responsibilities, I listen to podcasts and read the books of organizational and productivity gurus. I adopt their techniques such as time-blocking and the pomodoro method. I preserve my “golden hours” – the time of my day when I am most alert and focused – for my most difficult work. But no matter how organized I get, I can’t do it all. And I shouldn’t expect this of myself.

Genesis 2:2 is a good reminder for over-achievers, Type-A personalities or anyone who feels like they just can’t keep up. God worked hard for six days, then rested on the seventh. The commandment to observe sabbath is a lesson in self-care and humility. We need rest. Everyone does. Even God rested. And, if we stop, the world will carry on. The sky will not fall. Our consumeristic culture values productivity above even our health and well-being. But we can resist this idolatry – worship of work – by hitting the “pause” button on our lives, taking a day, or a week, off. Resting is a means to assess who we are in relationship to our work, our lives and our God.



EXAMEN:

Consider your schedule for this week. Is there a day you can set aside for rest and renewal? What would happen on such a day? What would it feel like? Notice thoughts and feelings that arise as you consider this invitation to rest.



IMAGINE:

Imagine yourself on sabbath as the world moves on without your work and productivity. What does it feel like to rest as the world continues to turn. What thoughts, fears or stresses arise as you witness what is accomplished without your effort? Where is God, and what is God doing as you rest?



PRAY:

Free me from this burden, O God, so I can live with your blessing.

Examining our love to live with heart



APR. 2: *Sunday* LOVE OF NEIGHBOR

“Which of these three was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” (Luke 10:29)

In Luke 10, Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan to interpret what it means to love “your neighbor as yourself.” On the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, a Samaritan finds a man beaten by robbers and does not steer clear, unlike others who have passed by. He crosses the road to reach the man in need because as, Luke says, “he was moved with pity.” A more literal translation of the Greek is “his heart was melting.”

Liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez writes that justice work requires us to love as people of flesh and blood, to love with hearts that melt when we encounter neighbors who are in need. Liberation, Gutiérrez writes, will not come from cold religious obligation or a charitable sense of duty. It will come not from mechanical rationalizations of our mind but from authentic, fleshy, heart connections. God works among us, freeing us, opening our hearts, helping us become more fully human, or humane, through the relationships that grow between neighbors.

EXAMEN:

Recall a human need that makes your heart melt — poverty, hunger, war, incarceration, etc. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise.

IMAGINE:

Imagine yourself coming across a stranger in need as you travel. What does this stranger look like? What do they say? What do they need? Allow your heart to melt in this moment. Pay attention to the feeling of compassion, connection and mercy. How does this feeling hurt? How does it set you free?

PRAY:

Free me for love, O God, so I can live with heart.

Examining our love to live with heart



APR. 3: *Monday* LOVE OF SELF

“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.”
(1 John 4:7-8)

1 John speaks to us of God’s love in poetic words and addresses us, the readers, as “Beloved.” Love for us exists even before we exist. As “beloved” children, born of God, we are loved even before we are born. No matter what we do, who we are, or who we become, God’s love is behind and before us — surrounding us and our lives.

The greatest trap in our life is not success, popularity or power, but self-rejection. In his book *Life of the Beloved*, Henri Nouwen writes about how God’s message of love often gets lost in our own self-rejection, “It certainly is not easy to hear God’s voice of love in a world filled with voices that shout: ‘You are no good, you are ugly; you are worthless; you are nobody.’ These negative voices are so loud and so persistent that it is easy to believe them. Self-rejection is the greatest enemy of the spiritual life because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us the ‘Beloved.’”

The source of all love names us, “Beloved.” This Lent, let us seek to open ourselves to God’s love and allow ourselves to be loved.



EXAMEN:

Recall a situation or an experience that led you to feelings of self-rejection. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise.



IMAGINE:

Imagine yourself as one child among many crowded around Jesus, trying to catch his attention. Jesus sees you, leads you out of the crowd so you can be near him. Jesus talks to you as if no one else is around. He pays attention to you and your needs. He loves you. Listen carefully to hear what Jesus wants you to know.



PRAY:

Free me for love, O God, so I can live with heart.

Examining our love to live with heart



APR. 4: *Tuesday* LOVE OF RESPECT


“Honor everyone.” (1 Peter 2:17)

I’m going to do something weird,” Malak whispered to Katie, her bunkmate on our interfaith immersion trip to Chicago. Malak and Katie were both students at the college I served as chaplain. Neither knew each other well before the trip. Each practiced a religion foreign to the other.

Malak slipped into her prayer robe, its royal blue flower print covering her head, her arms to her wrists, and her body to her feet. She began her prayers facing Mecca, alternating positions of standing and prostrating herself, forehead to the floor while silently praying in Arabic. When she finished, Katie intentionally took a moment to say, “I don’t think it’s weird, Malak. I think it’s beautiful.”

Respect and honor go hand in hand. Both position us to care for and regard another’s feelings, rights, wishes, beliefs and traditions. Such respect is beautiful because it recognizes our ability to cross boundaries of difference and grow in mutual understanding.

According to scripture, we are not to pick and choose who is worthy of our regard. We are to respect and honor everyone. It’s simple, straightforward and beautiful.

 **EXAMEN:**

Recall a time when you felt disrespected. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise.

 **IMAGINE:**

Imagine yourself interacting with people wholly different than yourself. They speak, believe, act and worship differently. How can you be among these people respectfully? What thoughts, feelings and actions would honor these people as you interact with them?

 **PRAY:**

Free me for love, O God, so I can live with heart.

Examining our love to live with heart



APR. 5: *Wednesday* LOVE OF HONESTY

“So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another.” (Ephesians 4:25)

Years ago, I interviewed for a position as the pastor of a small church. We liked each other, the fit felt good. I advanced to the last meeting between myself and the search committee when they asked a question that changed everything. Did I believe gay and lesbian people should be ordained as officers and ministers in the church? I answered honestly. “Yes,” I said, “I believe they should.” My answer ended the interview and any possibility of being called to serve as their pastor.

I’d wanted that job. And I suspected the search committee wouldn’t like my answer. In such situations it’s tempting to “spin” what we say to get to a favorable outcome, or to avoid answering a tough question. But honesty is the foundation of trust. If we can’t be honest, we can’t build trusting relationships — with others, with ourselves or with our God.

Ephesians emphasizes honest talk and a “putting away (of) falsehood.” Truthful speech is the first step in building any relationship, inspired by the way God is honest with us.

EXAMEN:

Recall a moment when you weren’t honest with someone. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise.

IMAGINE:

Imagine yourself talking to a friend and they ask casually, how are you today? How would you typically answer this question? Pause to consider your thoughts and feelings so you can answer their question as honestly as possible.

PRAY:

Free me for love, O God, so I can live with heart.

Examining our love to live with heart



APR. 6: *Thursday* LOVE OF OPENNESS

“We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians; our heart is wide open to you. There is not restriction in our affections, but only in yours. In return – I speak as to children – open wide your hearts also.” (2 Corinthians 6:11-13)

I give you the end of a golden string;
 Only wind it into a ball,
 It will lead you in at Heaven’s gate,
 Built in Jerusalem’s wall.

William Stafford often quoted these poetic lines by William Blake when he described his own writing process as a poet. Stafford believed that any detail, set to language, becomes the end of a golden string — the sound of a barking dog, the memory of your mother’s hands, the crack of a tree branch. These details will lead you to Heaven’s gate – which might take the form of a beautiful poem – if you are open to following that golden string.

The stance of the poet must be one of openness. He or she is to be susceptible and ready. There can be no preconceived notions. The writer is not to impose his or her ideas on the poem, but simply follow the golden string.

This is beautiful wisdom for us as followers of Christ, too. Paul speaks of his openness to the Corinthians. He meets them where and as they are, with no expectations, no restricted affection. Such openness is a stance of love, and a position of trust. These people might lead you to Heaven’s gate. One never knows. But only if we are open will we be able to discover the gold they have to offer.



EXAMEN:

Recall a moment in your life when you felt stuck, unable to discern what to do or what direction to go. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise.



IMAGINE:

Imagine you are out for a walk and discover a golden string on the ground. Pick up the string and follow it carefully. Don’t pull or tug on the string, just wind it in a ball as you follow. Notice where the string is leading you. Pay attention. Breathe and let go of all your expectations. What do you discover?



PRAY:

Free me for love, O God, so I can live with heart.

Examining our love to live with heart



APR. 7: *Friday* LOVE OF HUMAN LIFE

“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” (Matthew 1:23)

When we consider humanity, we might quickly think of all the atrocities and sins we have committed — our wars, genocide and violence; our degradation and devaluation of our natural environment; our disrespect and dishonoring of those who are different. But God loves humanity. God loved us enough to become one of us.

God becoming flesh in the person of Jesus Christ reveals our Creator’s extraordinary love for us. As Cynthia Rigby writes in her book *Holding Faith*, God’s dramatic entrance into our lives as Jesus Christ reveals the Divine’s desire to be with us and for us. It’s a relationship of Lover and Beloved.

Through Jesus Christ, our human potential is also revealed. Yes, we sin and fall far short of God’s expectations. But we can also be courageous and caring. We can choose love in the face of hate, good over evil, right instead of wrong. Pause today to recall the best examples of humanity. Set these Christ-like models before you as evidence of your potential and marks of God’s love.



EXAMEN:

Recall a moment in your life when you acted faithfully, a moment you look back on and feel good about because you embodied your best, most Christ-like self. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise.



IMAGINE:

Call to mind people who you admire as Christ-like. Hold these people in your mind. Consider their qualities. Consider how they came to be who they are. Give God thanks for these Christ-like models.



PRAY:

Free me for love, O God, so I can live with heart.

Examining our love to live with heart



APR. 8: *Saturday* LOVE OF GOD

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” (Deuteronomy 6:5)

Our family eats dinner together as often as possible. We’ve never explicitly made a rule about screens at the table, but we honor this time with our attention and shut down our distracting devices. Sometimes, when we come together around the table, we’ve had a bad day and are feeling grumpy. Other times, my kids have been fighting and don’t like each other very much. Our conversations aren’t always happy, or deep. Talking with teenagers often gets responses like “Yeah” or “Sure”, a nod or an eye roll. Yet, still we gather. It’s our ritual of love that keeps us bound together as a family.

As we come to the close of Lent and the last of these daily devotions, I pray this time spent with God has born faithful fruit. Today, think back on your Lenten journey. What did you learn about yourself along the way? What did you learn about God? Would you like to continue practicing examen? Loving God means honoring our Savior with our time and attention. Not every day’s devotional practice will yield deep thoughts or life-altering epiphanies. But love is a choice we make every day, a relational practice that requires us to show up — just like Christ shows up for us. May God bless you in your continued faith practice. May you love and be loved.

EXAMEN:

Recall a time when you gathered with people you love. Breathe. Notice thoughts and feelings that arise.

IMAGINE:

Imagine yourself setting aside time to spend with God, sitting at a table with your Savior. Sit in God’s presence and breathe deep. Recognize God’s full attention on you, on your life and your concerns. Love God with your attention. What do you notice in this moment? What do you feel? What do you learn?

PRAY:

Free me for love, O God, so I can live with heart.

Examining our love to live with heart



APR. 9: *Easter Sunday*

“But the angel said to the women, ‘Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples.’” (Matthew 28:5-7)

Through the interior work you have done this Lent, what have you noticed in your outward life? Has your interior work benefited how you walk through the world, how you carry yourself, how you are with others? Are you more open, accepting, ready to follow or trust?

On Easter we celebrate resurrected life. As soon as the women at the tomb became aware of Jesus’ resurrection, the angel told them to go and share the good news. I pray this Lenten journey has raised, or resurrected, awareness of who you are in relationship to God. I pray this interior work has blessed your outward living in ways that send you ready to share the Good News.

PRAY:

Free me through Christ, O God, so I can live a resurrected life, ready to share the Good News. Amen.

INWARD WORK FOR OUTWARD LIVING

2023

Lenten Devotions

WRITTEN BY TERI MCDOWELL OTT



THE PRESBYTERIAN OUTLOOK