

A still life arrangement of autumn harvest items. In the foreground, a large, smooth, reddish-orange pumpkin sits on a piece of burlap. Behind it, a woven basket is filled with various items: a large yellow pumpkin, several ears of golden corn, and several small, colorful gourds in shades of green, yellow, and orange. The background is softly blurred, showing more pumpkins and gourds. The overall lighting is warm and natural, creating a cozy, autumnal atmosphere.

“All of it”

Finding Gratitude
& Being Thankful
in all of life

November, 2023

“All of it”

Too often times religion relegates God’s activity and involvement in life to the circumstances that we deem positive or good. The challenging or even confusing situations we set aside...almost hiding them from our consciousness so as not to be bothered by their unknown meaning or value.

This November I want to invite you to make a choice to find God in **all of it!** → to intentionally choose to focus on some of the beautiful and meaningful things in life for which you are grateful – things are sometimes found in the joyful place when things have gone exactly the way we hoped/planned.

But often times these things are found in places of disappointment and uncertainty...situations that we would not have sought and yet we find blessing, strength and the tangible experience of God’s presence with us.

This devotional is intended to be a resource as we journey through this season of Thanksgiving in a posture of thanksgiving and gratitude. If life is a gift...then **all of it** is a gift and we seek to be those whose praise of God is not predicated on our circumstances!

In these pages are stories, memories, poems and reflections written by people in our own church community inviting us...inviting you...to explore more intentionally *what in life you are truly grateful for.*

Use this devotional as a daily source of encouragement and spend 5, 15 or 55 minutes allowing yourself to be mindful of the gift that life is...all of it!.

Journeying with you through the sacredness of this season,



Wednesday, November 1st

I had attended Chapel for about a year before Covid changed all our lives. I can remember the day church service began again in the sanctuary, and then in the Chapel. About that time I realized how important this church family was to me, and joined the church with four others with whom I had become close. Three weeks later, I was diagnosed with a serious condition and soon began treatment. While I have a large family that cared for me beautifully, I treasured the attentions of those within the church and their ministry to me.

Through Bible studies in both Presbyterian Women's circle and our life group, I came to know Jesus more deeply than ever before, and felt that my life was changing. I am so grateful for these women and groups and now strive to live a Christ centered life. I have come to learn just how special the fellowship of Christians is and that when we reflect this, show this, see this in others, the image of Christ can become even greater for all of us.

Scripture to reflect on:

Ephesians 4:11-16

Questions for reflection:

- How do you keep centered in Christ?
- How do you share the Love of Christ with others?

Peggy McGurk

Thursday, November 2nd

For nearly 20 years, I have worked in the field of animal welfare. A love of cats led me to this field, and cats keep me coming back. They are everything that legend and lore portray them to be—mysterious, ferocious, lazy—and yet they are so much more. A cat is a poem, a tempest, a teapot, a clown. They are both ordinary and extraordinary at once. When in the course of my work I meet people who emphatically declare themselves “dog people,” I always say, “You just haven’t met the right cat.” Because they are equally loyal, playful, unwavering companions who will follow you anywhere. My cat Olive even loved to play fetch!

I was asked to participate in this devotional project just days after helping to guide sweet Olive into a gentle passing from this world. It was unbelievably hard, but I am thankful I was able to give her this final gift. I think that suffering is something we very much have in common with God's creatures. But as God's chosen people, we are blessed with the gift of a path beyond suffering into hope. Understanding that there is something beneficial beyond it, as Paul illustrates, can over time allow us to not just tolerate suffering, but willingly embrace it. That knowledge allowed me to make such a difficult decision on Olive's behalf, even knowing the heartache that would inevitably follow.

Already there is a new kitten in our household. Cricket came before Olive left us. In her, as in these verses from Romans, I find solace and respite from my grief and the strength to move forward with hope.

Scripture to reflect on:

Romans 5:3-5

Questions for reflection:

- What trying times have you lived through that you can look back on and recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit in your life?
- How can you frame challenges you may currently be facing to recast them in an ultimately positive light?
- How have you experienced the love of God's creatures in your life?
- What role does hope play in your life?

Melissa Adkins

Friday, November 3rd

In gratitude for drought or flood...

By the time I was five, I knew “drought” meant only flushing sometimes, and baths in two inches of water. This made summer visits to Louisiana *magical*. My grandmother, Madea, filled the vast iron bathtub deep enough for me to float. There was constant high humidity, the flat fields of rice and sugarcane were a brilliant green, and best of all, it rained warm water. (Once when a storm created waterspouts over the Atchafalaya Basin, it even rained *frogs*.)

Childhood’s blessing is to find fun in whatever circumstance. I am grateful that Jesus so valued a childlike, trusting heart, that He urged us to become like children, able to trust enough to leap into the next adventure – whether that be in an arid, sunbaked place, or one where it rains frogs.

Scripture for reflection:

“...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. *I can do all this through him who gives me strength.*” Philippians 4:11-13 NIVR

Questions for reflection:

- What does ‘content’ look like to you?
- Does your definition of ‘contentment’ make it a ‘doing’ or a ‘being’ word? Can it be both? How?
- What is a particular aspect of a childlike heart you see in yourself for which you can thank God?

Tanita Davis

Saturday, November 4th

About eight months after my cancer diagnosis, I became extremely anxious and depressed. I had gone back to work after two months off, and I realized that I wasn’t the same person that I had been. I had problems with my memory and speech. I wasn’t sure that I could continue working. I felt so despondent that I didn’t think I would make it through the year. My anxiety about my future was so great that I contemplated taking my life. For the first time in my life, I didn’t know if I even believed in God anymore. How could He let me suffer such crippling anxiety, day after day, without respite?

After a fortuitous (heaven sent?) encounter with Pastor Steve Wilde outside the post office one day, I was introduced to psychologist Dr. David Day. He is a spiritual man, and seemed to be someone who could help me. After several meetings, weeping during the entire hour of our session, I confessed to him what I couldn’t even say aloud, that I was doubting the existence of God. He gently guided me through my troubled feelings. After the session, I felt as if an enormous weight had been lifted from my shoulders. That was the beginning of my emotional recovery. I’ve had, and continue to have, support and love from countless other people, but I’m profoundly grateful to David for helping me through the most frightening time in my life.

Scripture to reflect on:

Psalm 30
John 14:1

Questions for reflection:

- When was there a time in your life when your faith was tested?
- Who helped you through a crisis in your life?

Jennifer Guethlein

Sunday, November 5th ~ All Saint's Day

Scripture for Today's Worship Service ~ Revelation 21:1-5

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

'See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them;

they will be his peoples,

and God himself will be with them;

he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more,

for the first things have passed away.'

And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.'

- Spend some time today remembering & reflecting on those who have died that positively impacted your life & faith.

Monday, November 6th

Slow down.....breathe in the moment.....quiet your heart.....release your thoughts.....

.acknowledge the simple things. Thankfulness is a part of that process for me.

Thankfulness is the action of acknowledging the simple moments. The intentional response to force myself to slow down and recognize the joy my grandson's laughter brings, the melting of my heart when my granddaughter smiles, the fun times spent with family, the quiet conversations with my husband, the welling in my soul when I worship Christ through song, the encouragement from members of our church through a simple smile or an encouraging word or a sweet text from a friend. Thankfulness is calming and refreshing. The Lord beckons us to celebrate these moments. To surrender to his creation and practice gratitude.

When I was younger these moments were harder to recognize. It was difficult to find quiet and recognize thankfulness when my children were crying, my house was a mess, my laundry was piling up and my solace in the Lord was filled with little hands and feet begging for attention. Now that those little hands and feet are grown, I reminisce and find joy and thankfulness for those moments. In this season, God is the little hands and feet. He is speaking to my heart and interrupting my plans. He is beckoning me to recognize that interruptions are opportunities to find thankfulness, seek joy, respond to a need, or pray. He reminds me that my plans are not my own. If I listen closely, I can hear His voice redirecting my steps and my intentions. He brings thankfulness. I just need to slow down and allow for the moment. God is calling you to slow down and breathe in the moment. Listen for Him to speak about how thankful He is for you today.

Scripture to reflect on:

Hebrews 13:15

Psalms 86:12; 95:2

Questions for reflection:

- Take out a piece of paper and write all the things you are thankful for today - the big things and the little things.
- Was it easy for you to recognize things you are thankful for?
- How does God speak to your heart?

Kelly Jonas

Tuesday, November 7th

2023 began extra well for my wife Sheri and I, when we learned that we would be expecting our first grandchild this summer. Then an unfortunate series of events occurred – I caught COVID 19, which was not very serious, but Sheri fell over a gate while taking care of me and our daughter’s sick dog. Sheri broke her ankle and required surgery. She had a long recovery period, and we were uncertain whether she would regain full mobility again.

During this time of trouble, we were very thankful for the support of the First Presbyterian Church community. Many brought meals to us and visited, sharing their own stories of injury and healing. Pastor Christina took my wife to a doctor’s appointment while I was still under quarantine with COVID. Pastor Steve managed to talk with my wife and me minutes before her surgery, and visited us during recovery to provide support. We felt very touched by the community of faith and cared for at every step of Sheri’s recovery. I’m happy to say that my wife is back to nearly 100 %. We know that not every serious injury ends with full recovery, and we’re very blessed that our faith family and medical care team brought about a very positive outcome. We also now have a wonderful grandchild, and are happy to enjoy outings with him.

Scripture to reflect on:

As Paul says in 1 Thessalonians chapter 5, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”.

Questions for reflection:

- Have your circumstances changed for the better or worse in the recent past?
- What faith resources have helped you deal with change?
- Are there ways in which challenges can make the good things in life seem more precious?

Larry Fried

Wednesday, November 8th

Giving Thanks for the Veggie Table

I have a wise friend who often asks
where I have seen God in my life.

I see the hand of God in

A harvest springing up out of the earth
A few months ago there was just mulch here

The bright orange pumpkins
Hiding under umbrellas of deep green leaves

Wanda points them out
We saw through their celery-like stems

The butternut squash is so big we split it in half
Fall soup for two families

Scripture to reflect on:

James 1:16-18, 1 Corinthians 15:35-58

Questions for reflection:

- Where have you seen God in your life lately?
- James 1:16-18 talks about good gifts from God. What good gifts are you thankful for?
- What do you picture when you read the 1 Corinthians 15 metaphor of a sprouting seed symbolizing resurrection life?

Gretchen Reynolds

Thursday, November 9th

Each evening, my family and I come together to select a chapter from the Bible, read it, and pick our favorite verse. Then, we take turns explaining why we like our chosen verses. This helps us understand the Bible better and makes our faith stronger.

Following our verse selections and discussions, we pray as a family. We take turns leading the prayer, making sure that each day a different member of the family has the opportunity to pray. In our prayers, we say about things we're worried about, pray for friends and families, pray for the things we see on the news, or simply give thanks to God for our blessings.

Scripture to reflect on:

Mathew 18:20

Questions for reflection:

- Have you ever got confused about the versus you read in the bible? Have you considered discussing with others?
- How often do you thank God for the things he has done for you?

Megan and Antony Selvaraj

Friday, November 10th

For a long time, my family has spent some of our Thanksgiving together in Yosemite. There's something very special about the valley in the winter, and especially in the morning. The sun takes a while to peer over the edges of the cliffs, but when it arrives, it illuminates the whole floor. There's a sense that the valley sighs in relief as the frost begins to melt and the animals emerge from their dens.

I'm not naturally a morning person, but Yosemite's mornings are worth getting up for. I always take some time when I'm up there to just sit and watch the valley awaken. I am grateful for the simple pleasure of a new morning; a new sunrise after a long dark. It's very easy to get caught up in the broader view of life, but the chance to rejoice in the new day each morning is a gift.

Scripture:

This is the day that the Lord has made;

let us rejoice and be glad in it.

- Ps. 118:24

Reflection Questions:

- How do you start your day? What emotions do you feel when you wake up?
- How often do you think of the day as something "the Lord has made"? Does that mindset make you consider your day differently?
- What does joy in the morning look like? How can you foster it? "Coffee" is a valid answer.
- What new things are you grateful for?

Blessings,

Tanner

Saturday, November 11th

When I was growing up, whether I was 4 or 14, my mother was very supportive of my questioning of aspects of religion that did not make sense to me, and willing to present more complex ideas to me. She helped me to see doubt and complexity as elements of and companions to faith, not challenges to faith. I believe the result is that I was much more receptive to having faith in Jesus Christ, much more receptive to the message of Christ, and more able to feel the grace of God in times of sorrow as well as times of joy. I will always be very grateful to my mother for helping shape my faith in this way.

Scripture to reflect on:

John 20: 24-29

Questions for reflection:

- What answers to questions about faith have helped strengthen your faith and helped you feel the grace of God?
- In the passage from John, when Jesus says, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe,” do you view Jesus as referring to those who believe without doubt, those who believe in spite of doubt, or that Jesus does not make a distinction?
- Are there any doubts or complexities about faith that you believe strengthen your faith and you are thankful for?

Bob Taylor

Sunday, November 12th

Scripture for Today’s Worship Service ~ John 15:1-12

‘I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower.

He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit.

Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.

You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you.

Abide in me as I abide in you.

Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches.

Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love.

I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

‘This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

- Make a list of what brings you JOY.

Monday, November 13th

Like so many others, these recent years have been a series of hard transitions. Some have been more sudden and painful than expected. Others have been a slow, prolonged drain on our hearts and minds; wearing us down to the brink of collapse. But if we have just a tentative grasp on the smallest seed of faith; we can call on Jesus to help us get to the next moment.

Finding my husband and myself in our mid-sixties; our adult daughter and son are seeing us as senior citizens. This is amusing at times, but not always. Both raised under the Catholic umbrella, we are each at a different place on the path that the LORD has laid before us. I attend church with enthusiasm. He chooses to stay at home. But I have noticed him looking at the sunsets more and more. Possibly from my mention of how each momentary transition of light is an act of love that God created, just for him. And that where we look will determine what we see, in the sky and in our lives. I am grateful for each moment that brings him closer to God, even if he never joins me on Sunday mornings.

Looking for and finding reasons to give thanks can and will strengthen the faith that can sustain us individually and as members of the church universal; wherever we sit, every day.

Scripture to reflect on:
Colossians 2:6-7 (NIV)

Questions for Reflection:

- How have the last 2-3 years challenged your faith? Has it gotten stronger at times and weaker at others? Where are you at this moment?
- What, if anything, has helped you? Do you find comfort in sticking to a routine of private prayer? Or does a change of scenery and meeting with a friend help?
- Do you hear, feel or see God speaking to you throughout the day? If not, will you allow yourself to ask God for help and be open to listening for, “that still, small voice” in whatever form it takes?

Lynda Kinnard

Tuesday, November 14th

On Tuesday mornings at 7 AM, Room F5 at church fills up with a group of men from the church and community for a weekly Bible study. This group is led by our incurably upbeat pastor, and when I walk in the room, it is usually to the sound of laughter as Steve pings us for stories from our past week. Our discussions of the past Sunday’s sermons are equally seasoned with insights, questions, thoughts and passionate repartee as we grapple with how to understand and live this Christian life we profess. I am grateful to be a part of this group and to learn from the interesting perspectives and life experiences each individual brings to the group.

One week not so long ago we reflected on the first part of the Sermon on the Mount as found in Matthew 5:1-16. This magnificent passage is Jesus’ inaugural kingdom sermon in which he lays out what we as members of his Kingdom are to be and do. Nine times in quick succession Jesus emphasizes a different characteristic of those in his kingdom by calling those who bear the characteristic ‘blessed’. Our natural inclination is to read these statements as ‘You will be blessed by God if you are poor in spirit, really good at mourning, high on the meek scale’, and the like. But this can’t be what Jesus means! Jesus is not giving us a Spiritual Aptitude Test, with an SAT score of at least 5 of 9 required for a passing grade that gets us into His kingdom! Instead, Jesus gifts each one of us with these attributes in order that we can be effective as ‘the light of the world’ (vs. 14) for others. What an amazing job description we have, mirroring Jesus’ distinctive traits so that others will ‘see our good works and give glory to our Father in heaven’ (vs. 16). Isn’t that the ultimate sign of being Blessed, to give glory to the One who blesses us? Thanks be to God!

Scripture to reflect on:
Matthew 5: 1-16

Questions for reflection:

- What characteristics do you hold that help you to feel blessed by Jesus?
- When has hearing another’s experience shaped your perspective on your faith?

Timothy Zwier

Wednesday, November 15th

When I'm upset, I go and walk by the creek.

Walking by the stream, listening to the music of the water, hearing birds call to each other among the trees, and watching fish move through their watery world calms my heart, and my thoughts settle. I feel God's loving presence. I am comforted knowing my body is not separate from the rest of creation.

I am grateful for the beauty of the creek, for the life in my veins, for the gift of water and connection. Morning and evening, I drink a glass of water and give thanks for the day.

Scripture to reflect on:

Jeremiah 17:7-8

Questions for reflection:

- Where do you go for solace?
- Where do you feel close to God?
- Jeremiah speaks of trusting in the Lord. Is it easy or difficult to trust in God? How so?
- What feeds your spirit?
- What are you grateful for?

Lisa Sogo

Thursday, November 16th

Growing up in a Deaf family, I am thankful for the access to my native language, American Sign Language. I never once missed a conversation when I was a little boy with my family because the entire family members were communicating in ASL. Later on, when I have 3 children who are hearing, the approach remains the same at our dining table or around the house. Our children learned American Sign Language naturally (native language) and I continue to have full access to language within my family. For that, I am and will always be grateful.

Just as language access is vital for effective communication and understanding within your family, access to faith and spiritual beliefs can be equally important for individuals to find meaning and purpose in their lives. Ensuring that everyone can access the resources and support they need, whether it's linguistic or spiritual, is a value that many people can appreciate and empathize with.

Scripture to reflect on:

Romans 5:1-2

Questions for reflection:

- What does accessibility mean to you?
- What would you do if you noticed that an individual is not having access to something s/he should?
- How much does it cost for an access to faith?

Joey Baer

Friday, November 17th

I met Sherri when she came to work in our office. Having had her daughter as my intern, I was familiar with her sunny disposition and welcomed the opportunity to have her join our team. During her tenure, Sherri was diagnosed with a rare and aggressive form of cancer. While the diagnosis was shocking, there was no time to digest this information as chemo and a bone marrow transplant became an immediate necessity.

Her church became a test site for those in the community that wanted to be tested as a potential match for her, and to join the bone marrow database. She was placed on countless prayer chains, her daughters emailed daily updates and people prepared food to nourish the family. We all waged war against this disease that threatened to take our friend, mother, co-worker and congregation member away from us. The gravity of Sherri's situation was apparent when her pastor agreed to meet her and her fiancé at their church shortly before midnight on the eve of reporting to the hospital. He would officially bond them as husband and wife before she entered the treatment that would hopefully save her life.

Her family arranged a schedule where friends and family would be present with her during every minute she was hospitalized. I signed up for overnight shifts on Wednesday nights. I arrived at 6pm and would stay until 6am when the next person would relieve me. I read magazines to her, caught her up on the latest happenings in our office, and talked about God. It never failed that Sherri's worst nights were when I visited, and neither of us got much sleep. She was extremely ill, weak, unable to walk without assistance, and at times I would provide care I'm pretty sure only nurses should have been performing. During these moments, her faith burned brightest. Her hair fell out, she praised God. She would writhe in pain and proclaim God as the one who would lead her out of the dark valley. Her faith wouldn't be shaken. After Sherri beat that cancer, she went on to fight two other forms of cancer, and successfully beat them, too. Her faith never wavered and in her darkest hours she taught me what it means to truly place it all in God's hands. I am so thankful for Sherri and her example of what complete faith looks like.

Scripture to reflect on:

The verse that reminds me of Sherri, our relationship and her strength is James 1:12 -"Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him."

Questions for reflection:

- What trials have you faced that truly pushed your limits and tested your faith?
- Who are the people that stand out as examples of having unending faith? How have they impacted your life?

Diana Garcia

Saturday, November 18th

In our Sunday school class last month we talked about thankfulness. Through the story of Moses and the Israelites in the desert we learned we can choose to be thankful. Things don't always go our way and some days can be really hard. God listens to us even when we have a hard day and even on hard days we can still find something that brightened our day.

My family practices this each night at dinner time. We go around the table and share our favorite part of the day, what we are most thankful for from our day. Whether that is spending time with friends after school, playing games, having a good day at work, being happy about an accomplishment during the day, or even being able to just be together for dinner. We get to share with each other the things we are thankful for each and every day. Doing this with my family everyday reminds me that I can be thankful for lots of things and even the small things in my day. I love sharing about my favorite part of the day and hearing about what my parents are thankful for from their days. Every day gives us an opportunity to be thankful.

Today I'm especially thankful for the time I get to spend with my family. We enjoy going on vacations together, sharing new experiences, and doing fun activities.

Scripture to reflect on:

Psalm 118:24, Isaiah 43:19b

Questions for reflection:

- What can you choose to be thankful for today?
- What is one way you can show your thankfulness to God this week?

Rowan and Brie MacLaren

*Sunday, November 19th***Scripture for Today's Worship Service ~ Judges 6:11-16, 36-40**

Now the angel of the Lord came and sat under the oak at Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, as his son Gideon was beating out wheat in the wine press, to hide it from the Midianites. The angel of the Lord appeared to him and said to him, 'The Lord is with you, you mighty warrior.' Gideon answered him, 'But sir, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our ancestors recounted to us, saying, "Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt?" But now the Lord has cast us off, and given us into the hand of Midian.' Then the Lord turned to him and said,

'Go in this might of yours and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian; I hereby commission you.' He responded, 'But sir, how can I deliver Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family.' The Lord said to him, 'But I will be with you, and you shall strike down the Midianites, every one of them.'

Then Gideon said to God, 'In order to see whether you will deliver Israel by my hand, as you have said, I am going to lay a fleece of wool on the threshing-floor; if there is dew on the fleece alone, and it is dry on all the ground, then I shall know that you will deliver Israel by my hand, as you have said.' And it was so. When he rose early next morning and squeezed the fleece, he wrung enough dew from the fleece to fill a bowl with water. Then Gideon said to God, 'Do not let your anger burn against me, let me speak one more time; let me, please, make trial with the fleece just once more; let it be dry only on the fleece, and on all the ground let there be dew.' And God did so that night. It was dry on the fleece only, and on all the ground there was dew.

- How does uncertainty & mystery play a part in faith?

Monday, November 20th

Thanksgiving is typically steeped in Tradition, with a capital T, and our family is often swept up in the many traditions that generations of our family have passed down to us. However, we have occasionally strayed from the traditional path of celebrating Thanksgiving. One time was when we didn't travel hours to a relative's house but stayed at home with our kids who were 10, 8, and 5 years old. I asked our kids what they would like to eat for Thanksgiving dinner instead of cooking a turkey and they came up with the idea of eating barbecue ribs! In addition, our girls wanted to dress up in the Native American Indian dresses that had been their Halloween costumes, and our son made an Indian vest made out of a brown grocery bag in his Kindergarten class! I think that left us parents as portraying the Pilgrims. During our dinner, we talked about the trials that the pilgrims had in coming to a new land, how the Native Americans helped them adapt and survive so that they didn't starve or freeze, and the importance of being in a community that helps others and where we can learn and accept help from others when we need it.

I am grateful to be part of a community that shows love for others, whether someone is suffering from emotional or physical despair or listens with interest and respect to the stories in their life that matter to them.

Scripture to reflect on:

These are acts of love that Jesus so simply gave us to do in John 13:34-35 "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Questions for Reflection:

- Was there a time when you felt lost or desperate for some physical or emotional need?
- Did you feel grateful for the support that you received?
- How does it make you feel when you show love and care to others?

Deb Halford

Tuesday, November 21st

It has been a year of change, a year of grief, and a year of having to do more. It has been a year of moving forward and trying not to complain, trying to focus on the good, and always focusing on THE GOD.

While navigating a divorce, taking on the role of parent to a grandson, changing teaching partners at work, I have often struggled. Then I remember my mother, who lost her father when she was only 5, who grew up poor with a widowed mom and 6 siblings, who suffered greatly with lung disease and died at 51 and yet never once complained - never once felt sorry for herself, who never stopped being grateful for each day, grateful for what she did have. I am forever grateful for my mother, and for my God who lets me lean on Him for strength.

I know it's often quoted, put on t-shirts and tattoos, but Philippians 4:12-13 has and will always be a reminder of my mother's strength and of the strength God gives me.

Scripture to reflect on:
Philippians 4:12-13

Questions for reflection:

- Have you suffered a loss recently and if so, how has your faith helped you?
- Do you think life's challenges make you stronger? If so, what role does faith play in that?
- What blessing are you most grateful for today?

Janet Dimits

Wednesday, November 22nd

For this Lovely Day

God, this season has been a slog
That it's hard to remember what it was like
To me surprised by wonder.
I no longer notice the little things
That used to stop me in my tracks.
Like the bird's song.
Or the redbud's blossom.
Or the twinkling sky.
Or the sound of his laugh.
Or their crinkly-nose smile.
They have become white noise,
A blur of details in my daily grind.

Refresh me, oh God.
Remind me of the loveliness found in
today.
Surprise me with the details I have lost the
eyes to see.
Blessed are we, awakening from the
boredom of routine,
Desiring to drink in from the beauty
Around us once again,
Full of the love you have given us,
The joy that is hidden among
The reeds of the ordinary.

-By Kate Bowler

There are many days where my mind will automatically focus on what went wrong. The above devotion by Kate Bowler reminds me of those moments that can slip away if we are not careful. These moments can serve as a reminder of God's beauty and blessings if we take the time to stop and recognize them. I need this reminder in the midst of the busy days when I seem to be rushing around, making sure everyone has what they need, and filling any time I have with another task. SLOW DOWN!

One of the practices I have found that helps me to begin a day from a place of gratitude is to write down 2-3 things for which I am grateful. I have noticed when I start my day from this place, I am more likely to find the positive in the day before the negative. For me to be able to focus on gratitude I need to slow down. I need to stop and notice the blessings in the small moments, the moments I can easily take for granted.

- Read Psalm 9:1-2 and reflect on God's wonderful deeds.
- Write down 2-3 things for which you are thankful.

Thursday, November 23rd

Something that never fails to move me with thanksgiving, joy and the certainty of the presence of God the Creator is the sight of the beautiful hills that surround the Livermore Valley. Having grown up in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., no scenery was there that prepared me for the awesome panoramic sight of these hills shining in the sunlight or rising majestically even on cloudy days. In the decades I have lived in Livermore they always move me to gratitude and prayer in my heart whenever I see them. On my usual approach to the freeway down Isabel Avenue, the hills delight and calm me no matter how stressful my journey. They help me to remember God's presence in my life and to thank him for his many gifts.

Scripture to reflect on:

Psalm 121: 1-2

Questions for reflection:

- Is there any sort of visual or a particular place that lifts your heart in thankfulness to God?
- How have you found peace at a stressful time with "help from the Lord who made heaven and earth"?

Sue Miller

Friday, November 24th

I am grateful for the opportunities I have had to travel and live in different places throughout my life. With a bit of luck I'll travel to seven more states and be able to say I've been to all 50 states! My love of travel grew from the many car trips my family took while I was growing up. One summer we took almost 6000 miles to travel the 3000 miles across the United States. Yes, it was quite a zig zag trip!

Traveling has helped me to see the world with a wider view as I meet people with different beliefs and life stories than my own. Whether I'm driving across the United States, exploring the highlands and worshiping in Iona, Scotland, living with and meeting with Jewish and Palestinian peacemakers in Israel/Palestine, or being refreshed in body and spirit at Lake Tahoe's annual "Bell Camp," I have been blessed to see how God is at work in our world. As I hear the stories of those I encounter I am challenged to listen, to reflect and be open to other views. My heart is filled with hope and gratitude for all the ways God empowers us so we can make a difference in our world.

Scripture:

Psalm: 139: 1-12

Matthew 4:18-22

Questions for reflection:

- Have you ever been somewhere that makes you feel closer to God? Where was it, what made it a special place?
- Reflect on a person you've met that has expanded your thinking. What about their story was inspiring or challenged you? How do you see God working through them to make a difference in our world?

Cathryn Griggs

Saturday, November 25th

Introduction:

When I was growing up on the east coast my family had a tradition of always going to Vermont to see the leaves changing color. It was a fun time of being together and I was always so amazed at how beautiful the leaves and trees looked...especially since my dad would explain that they were in a process of dying/preparing to fall off the tree.

Many years later I remembered those trips when my dad's life was coming to an end...and I tried to remember the beauty of the process of dying. For everything there is a season...and I am so grateful for the ways in which the beauty of that process is reflected in all of creation. And I am thankful for leaves that change color since they remind me that after winter comes God's new life of spring.

Scripture to reflect on:

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

Questions for Reflection:

- What is your favorite season of the year? What is it about that season that you enjoy so much?
- The Ecclesiastes passage speaks of seasons/time for everything under heaven: which verse from the Ecclesiastes passage do you most resonate with?
- Do you think the different seasons are a good metaphor for faith? How so? Which season best describes your relationship with God right now?
- What is something that you are thankful/grateful for during this particular season of life & faith?

- Anonymous -

Sunday, November 26th

Scripture for Today's Worship Service ~ John 8:1-11

Early in the morning he came again to the temple.

All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them.

The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, 'Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?' They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him.

Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.'

And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground.

When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him.

Jesus straightened up and said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' She said, 'No one, sir.'

And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you.

Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.'

- Where in your life might you need to receive forgiveness and where might you need to extend it?

Monday, November 27th

Growing up as a young girl until my college years – my grandfather lived down in Pismo Beach area 10 miles from the beach in a town called Nipomo. Every single Thanksgiving my family spent our holiday down with Grandpa. My favorite part of the holiday was when the turkey was in the oven or when the meal was over – we would head over to the beach for some down time. Typically it was around sunset. The family time, along with the beauty of the sand and water brought peace to my soul. Looking out into the horizon at all the colors forming in the sky, it reminded me of endings and new beginnings but seamlessly it felt like that moment, time was stopped. Every time we went to the beach on Thanksgiving looking out at the immense beauty of God’s creation along with the blessings of my family – I would feel an overwhelming sense of belonging in the right place at the right time. Many times of trial in my life or downfalls, I would be “called” to spend time at the beach. I would crave that overwhelming sense of belonging, being cared for, and time-stopping affirmation that God has me.

Pismo beach is a place I have broken down, asked God many questions as to why me? Why do I endure this pain? Why do I feel so broken? Time after time, there is a moment of peace in my internal thoughts while admiring the sun setting over the horizon against the ocean waves. I know now, being an adult, that this is God speaking to me and giving me peace in my thoughts – calming me down and letting me know He has me. All I need to do is ask and pray for help and He will be there. He knew me already and all the plans for my life – he planned these moments and this beach here for me to reflect and know Him more, trust Him. I am grateful for the creation of this world that God has made for us to thrive, grieve, and grow through.

Scripture to reflect on:

Philippians 4:6-7; Jeremiah 29:11-13

Questions for reflection:

- What is your place of peace? Why does that place bring you peace to reflect?
- Have you ever been doubtful of God’s presence in your life - what brought you back, what made you realize God has you?
- The beach is filled with colors, fragrances, different types of animals/humans, and activities ranging from passive to extreme. How is the beach resemble God’s ideal for the world?

Ellen Myli

Tuesday, November 28th

Fall and Thanksgiving reminds our family of my Mom. A strong, kind Iowa native married to a Navy officer, she was an Autumn on the color palette, sang alto in the choir, and worked as a registered nurse. Some of her Fall favorites were cardinals and Autumn leaves, Iowa Hawkeye and Cal football, and Thanksgiving.

My Mom was a connector. She loved Jesus. She loved her family. She loved friends, and she loved people. She especially loved connecting, and was the great connector of family to family, friends to friends, neighbors to neighbors, and all to Jesus. She wanted everyone on Jesus’s team with her.

Her physical presence left us on January 2, 2021, but her essence remains. Continuing to connect us through her love, to Jesus and one another. We miss her deeply this time of year, but also remember her joy and thankfulness she expressed to us often.

The English New Testament Scholar N.T. Wright exclaimed in an interview in Christianity Today that “Christianity is a team sport. It’s something we do together. Think of the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, graciousness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23). All of those are things we do together. You can’t be practicing them apart from one another.” (Christianity Today: August 3, 2020) Jesus wants us on his team, and he picks us first!

Scripture to reflect on:

John 17: 20-21

Questions for reflection:

- Who are you thankful for connecting you to Jesus? If they’re still around, consider thanking them.
- Are you on a “team”, connected with others who are connected to Jesus?
- Are you connecting others to Jesus by practicing the fruits of the Spirit?

Steve Stewart

Wednesday, November 29th

One of my favorite places is Sand Lake, up in far northeast Minnesota. We were invited there by a good friend. His grandfather had built the place, a simple cabin without a phone or electricity, except when we ran an old, noisy generator up in the shed with the “biff”. A wood stove in the kitchen provided heat and a gas refrigerator, a small range and gas lamps were the amenities at the time. We enjoyed swimming and saunas, sailing and kayaking, fishing, games, puzzles and more. We’ve seen moose, beavers and otters, loons, eagles and swans, and sometimes the chipmunks will stuff their cheeks with sunflower seeds in the palm of your hand. On a clear night the sky is dazzling, with the Milky Way and innumerable stars spread from horizon to horizon; meteor showers are truly spectacular. Over the past 40 plus years, with improvements and many shared projects, it is more comfortable now. We are so grateful to our friends for welcoming us to be a part of their special place and times. It has become that for us, too.

I tend to be an early riser and often go out and walk along the beach, watching the water and the light change as the sun rises. I also love to check out the rocks along the shore. There are so many different compositions, colors, shapes and sizes, some smooth and rounded, others fractured and broken. What’s their story, where did they all come from? Did the glaciers that scoured out the lake carry some of them from far away? How much were they shaped by the wind and waves, and ages of tumbling with and against the others around them, and the pressures of winter’s ice? It’s like they are citizens of the shore, different, but in a shared place and time, each with its own origins and history, now together in this beautiful place.

Scripture to reflect on:

Psalm 8

Questions for reflection:

- What kind of environment do you find refreshes you? What do you feel there?
- How have time and interactions with others, similar and different, had an impact on you or shaped you?
- How can it be possible for you to feel appreciated and beautiful after you have been through seasons of tumult, stress or pressures?

*Thursday, November 30th***Scripture to reflect on ~ Philippians 4:4-13**

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it.

Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty.

In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need.

I can do all things through Jesus who strengthens me.

GRATITUDE list:

- Finish the month by taking some time to make a “gratitude list” and write down the things in your life for which you are thankful.



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- Published 2023 -