

Lent

Devotionals
2019



ABIDING HOPE
CHURCH

experience real life

Ash Wednesday

Wednesday, March 6

John 3:14-17: And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so the Son of the Human Being will be lifted up, in order that all who are trusting (pisteuon) have a life of the ages. So, for God loved (agapesen) the human culture (kosmon), that the 'one of a kind' son was given, in order that all who are trusting (pisteuon) into him not be obliterated but have a life of the ages. For God did not send the Son into the human culture in order to condemn the human culture, but in order that the human culture be made whole (sothe from sodzo) through him.

The first bible verse I ever memorized was John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son so that all who believe in him may not perish but have eternal life." I was probably in first or second grade when our Sunday School teacher (or the curriculum she was using) felt it imperative that we young children be able to recite this passage. We see this verse written on the faces of athletes or held up by spectators in the end zone because it articulates the old notion of what faith in Christ means: believe in Jesus so that you can go to heaven after you die. However, this is not the intent or even the meaning of John 3.



The entire Fourth Gospel is a "new" creation narrative, more to the story of Genesis. No part of the book is concerned with what happens to human beings after we die. The Gospel of John in its entirety tells the story of how the Christ, God's vision for humanity and for all things, became enfleshed in the person of Jesus to draw all people and all creation into intimate relationship with God and one another so that all may experience real life. Throughout our Lenten journey this year (our theme is Get Real!), we are being challenged to let go of the things that hold us back from living fully as children of God so that we can take up the things that draw us into full participation within God's reign. The Christ stands as our "guide" for what it looks like to live as a child of God. Jesus let go of hatred, bigotry, greed, malice, slander, gossip, and selfishness so that he could take up love, oneness, generosity, care, relationships, and service as signs of God's reign in the world. We can see time after time Jesus crossing barriers and boundaries to bring people together as children

of God across race, ethnicity, religion, gender, socio-economic structures, politics and anything else that threatens to divide or destroy. We see Jesus forgiving even those who were killing him. We see Jesus choosing love over power, wealth, or notoriety. His life serves to demonstrate our created identity and purpose for which God is counting on us to live fully as the means for transforming the world's culture so that all may have life.

Please don't give up chocolate or beer or coffee and call it a spiritual exercise during Lent. Let go of things that you will continue to let go of after Lent ends and pick up things that you will continue to carry. Can you be more generous? Is God calling you to serve more? Are you carrying resentment or animosity against anyone? Is addiction an ongoing struggle for you? From what does God want to set you free and into what is God leading you? Make this the focus of this year's Lenten journey so that you can Get Real!

Loving God, thank you for creating life and for giving me the opportunity to experience life. Help me to let go of the things that are keeping me from living fully and give me the courage to be the person, you precious child, that you created me to be through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Pastor Doug Hill

Grace Unleashed

Thursday, March 7

John 8: 1-11: Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. 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."

The sun bounced off the church walls as worshipers gathered for Ash Wednesday many years ago in Florida. This was the morning service, designed for folks who couldn't get to the service that evening. It didn't seem right to have Ash Wednesday worship be sunny. It should be at night, with people coming through the darkness to find their places in the shadows. After all, we come to confess our sins. Sin likes the shadows.

We knelt and began with these words, "Sin separates us from God, our neighbors, and creation, and so we do not enjoy the life our Creator intended for us." A long list of sins were read aloud, and we sagged more and more with each sin named. "We confess to you, Lord," we murmured again and again. We filed up to the altar and remembered that we are dust, and to dust we will return. The Altar Guild had burned palms from last year's Palm Sunday and mixed the ashes with oil. Ashes trickled down from the pastor's fingers onto foreheads as a cross was traced, then continued trickling on to blouses and shirts. When we tried to brush the ash clumps away, the result was not what we had hoped. Well-marked, we returned to our sun-drenched pews where we knelt, our heads lowered.

It was then that things changed. The pastor read these words, "Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, does not desire the death of sinners, but rather that they may turn from their wickedness and live." From a pew on the left came a sob. Then another. It was Charlie, one of our faithful retired folks. It's not unusual to weep a bit at church. But Charlie didn't weep, he sobbed. His wife Eleanor put her arm around him as his sobbing went on and on. The rest of us were silent, but we knew that we were irrevocably linked to Charlie's unnamed pain. I remember little else about the service, not even about gathering with Charlie around Jesus' body and blood. I do remember that people gently reached out to Charlie and Eleanor as they left. Then I, the pastor, went to them, and sat silently in their pew. Charlie choked out, "I drink. I guess I'm an alcoholic. It's been terrible for Eleanor and our kids. I know that God hates me and wants to kill me." A few sobs burst out again. "But then you said that God doesn't want me dead. Do you really mean that?"

Yes, I did. God really means that. That sunny Ash Wednesday, God's grace, wholly unleashed, hit Charlie hard in all the places in his life where it hurt. Why on a sunny Ash Wednesday did Charlie let his guilt and helplessness and despair be overwhelmed by grace? Why on that day did he realize that God loved and not hated him? We'll never know exactly. We do know that transformation began then.

As the days of Lent and beyond unfolded, Charlie listened intently again and again to the good news that God loved him. His recognition of God's ever-present, unleashed grace grew and grew. Spiritual conversations, times of confession and forgiveness, and gentle love-filled hugs accompanied him on his tough journey to sobriety and reconciliation with his family. Al-Anon meetings for Eleanor and AA meetings for her husband were essential and invaluable. When he said "I'm Charlie, and I'm an alcoholic," he stood up straighter, his eyes were filled with confidence, and his hands reached out to new friends and old. The tension between Charlie and Eleanor, tension they had kept well hidden, grew into greater tenderness for each other. Were some days better than others on this journey? For sure. But after a time, those tough days became few and far between.

That's what it can look like when we realize that God's grace is unleashed in our lives. It looks like Charlie's story. It looks like new life.

Take some time today to think about the following question: What is your story of grace unleashed?

Susie Gamelin



Maybe it's Ok if I'm Not Ok!

Friday, March 8

Isaiah 43:2: When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.

You may or may not be familiar with the lyrics of the song “Maybe It’s Ok” by We Are Messengers, but I love the lyrics and the contrasts within this song that many of us wrestle with:

“If I didn’t know what it hurt like to be broken
Then how would I know what it feels like to be whole
If I didn’t know what it cuts like to be rejected
Then I wouldn’t know the joy of coming home

Maybe it’s ok if I’m not ok
Cause the one who holds the world is holding onto me
Maybe it’s alright if I’m not alright
Cause the one who holds the stars is holding my whole life

If I didn’t know what it looked like to be dirty
Then I wouldn’t know what it feels like to be clean
If all of my shame hadn’t drove me to hide in the shadows
Then I wouldn’t know the beauty of being free”

We often feel that when we are hurting, God must be far from us, or has turned His face away from us. However, the Bible is clear; He will never leave us or forsake us, and He is there in the midst of the pain, the suffering, the wrong choices we make, the hurt we cause or the hurt that has been dealt to us... He is there. Even through these difficult experiences, He is right by your side, singing over you (Zephaniah 3:17), to remind you that He is inviting you into the full vision of what He has for you as a child of God— into Wholeness! The last two lines of the lyrics above are especially timely as we journey through Lent. Within our Lent worship series at church, you will be given the chance to take something you have hidden in the shadows of your heart and release it to God, through confession, and allow His grace to declare you as FREE – Unleashed! Come each weekend and on Wednesday nights to participate in that.

It’s OK to NOT be OK. God’s Word promises that He will make ALL things beautiful in their time (Ecclesiastes 3:11). He will wipe away every tear (Isaiah 25:8, Revelation 7:17 & 21:4). He will deliver you through the fire and through the flood (Isaiah 43:2), and His mercies are NEW every morning (Lamentations 3:22-23).

Gracious God, sing over me. Remind me you are there! Remind me of your love, and fill me with that love, so that, I may love others and walk with them no matter what they are going through.

Paul Schultz



God's Unconditional Love

Saturday, March 9

Luke 15:31-32 - And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'

As I sit in service and listen to any of the pastors/ pastoral interns at Abiding Hope, I hear a message, quite often now, that makes me feel safe. I say it every time I make a wet cross on my forehead after communion. That message is that God loves me and that He is proud of me no matter what.

Years of depression had left me convinced that I was worthless. I was hurting badly. I had screwed up. I was a horrible person. I was unlovable. I contemplated suicide on more than one occasion. Finally, I was going through a separation and I didn't know what to do.

I half-heartedly attended church on occasion before, but didn't have a relationship with God. I believed that He existed, but that was about it. And, as my life was crumbling around me and I was searching for answers, I made a choice to try to trust in God. It wasn't easy to trust at times, and I doubted myself on more than one occasion, but the more I started to trust Him, the more I started to believe in myself and that I wasn't worthless, that I wasn't a horrible person, that I was loveable.

Today, I still struggle with doubt of God's love on occasion, and the ability for myself to be loved as well. But trusting that He loves me and that He is proud of me has allowed myself to grow, and my relationships to grow, and for my love for others to grow exponentially.

God, thank you for blessing me with your unconditional love. Let me trust in Your love and continue to grow in my love for myself and others. Amen.

Joe Kuykendall



Get Real

Monday, March 11

James 4:8-10: Draw near to God, and (God) will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into dejection. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and (the Lord) will exalt you.

I was thinking about our theme this Lent -Get Real- as I attended a lecture this January. The speaker shared the struggle the church is facing in our culture. We are working to tell people the good news of Jesus in a world that believes Christians are hypocritical, homophobic, out of touch, hate science, and extremely judgmental. But what was remarkable about her lecture was what she shared as the answer. It is not to argue and debate or say “my church isn’t that way.” The way to begin changing the perception of the church is to get real.



To Get Real means to be honest about the ways the church has hurt people, to confess that we have hurt people in the name of Jesus. To Get Real means we are honest about the ways we are called to be humble about our own hypocrisy. All of us have spoken out of both sides of our mouths. Confess this. To Get Real means we engage the ways we have marginalized people in our culture for their gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, appearance, background, and their race. We must be honest about these things. To pretend that any of us are blameless before the Lord in any of these areas is to deny how much we have missed the mark (sinned). We must speak truth with humility. Anything else convicts us.

James writes, “Draw near to God, and (God) will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into dejection.

Humble yourselves before the Lord, and (the Lord) will exalt you.” (4:8-10)

Perhaps today is a day to practice some humility. To own the ways we have, intentionally and even unintentionally, harmed the world in which we live.

Holy God, we confess we have fallen short of your glory. We have swallowed our own belief that we are without sin. Take our sin and forgive us, humble us, and send us to be truth-tellers called to work toward healing and reconciliation in the world. Amen.

Pastor Jay Gamelin

Family Blessings

Tuesday, March 12

Philippians 4:13: I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

When I received a phone call in August of 2017, telling me that our nieces and nephew had been taken out of their home by Child Protective Services, I didn't even hesitate in deciding what we should do. I immediately called the caseworker and said, "please send them to us." My husband and I knew that their situation was not great at home, but we had no idea that it was as bad as it was. We had frequently talked about how we felt that we would end up with the kids at some point after their mother passed away, but this was not the scenario we had envisioned. Of course, we quickly learned that it was not a simple process!



All of our friends knew about the situation and what was happening, and I was always so shocked to hear people say that John and I were "saints" for what we were trying to do and that they wouldn't or couldn't do it. John and I had both retired a year before this all started, and we spent a lot of time on the golf course. People couldn't imagine how much our lives would change and that we were ok with that. After a year, the court finally granted us kinship foster status and in August 2018, the kids came to live with us. I'm not going to say that it has been easy. We have certainly had our ups and downs, but I can't imagine our lives being any different now. We love these kids and we love seeing them grow and thrive. I know that God gives us the things we need to make it work and I always knew that we would be able to handle it because it was the right thing to do.

These three kids have been a blessing to me, and I hope that we have been a blessing to them in return. I have experienced God's love working in and through my family as we navigate this new life together, and I know that God's love is present everywhere, in the hearts of people all around me, who have shown us support and compassion. I believe that all of the people who thought we were crazy taking this on, would do the same if they were in a similar situation. When we love and serve our families, we are doing God's work.

In the early 70's, when I was a confirmand at First Evangelical Lutheran Church in Longmont, my selected bible verse was Philippians 4:13, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." Even though I sometimes forget, this is still my verse. God gives us the strength to tackle the hardships that life throws at us, and if you have faith, you can do anything that you need to do.

Loving God, open our eyes and our hearts to see the blessings you give us, and enable us to go out with the strength and confidence to share those blessings with the world around us. Amen

Anne Harper

Be In Christ

Wednesday, March 13

1 Thessalonians 5:16: Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

The Lent season starts at the time when Jesus heads into the wilderness to be tempted, ever reminding us that our Savior was very human and had his struggles too. As we examine Christ's ministry in the 6 weeks leading up to Holy Week, there is much to learn as it relates to our challenge to be 'wholly unleashed.'

I didn't know what it meant to be in Christ, so I asked this of a respected elder. I was given the response of 1 Thessalonians 5:16, which reads 'Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you'. Just as Jesus was tempted as he was sent out, we too are sent out with the struggles of life. We must always be in Christ and rejoice in all circumstances. What a tall order. I sometimes lack the confidence or desire to put it on the line for Christ. In this situation, I think of a verse my friend lives by, "For God has not given us the spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline" (2 Timothy 1:7). Once again, I'm reminded of Jesus' march at this time. Look at his power and his discipline with that power. How can you not be inspired by the love he showed?

Fear often suppresses my ability to be wholly unleashed. My wife is my help in these matters. Her favorite verse, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Phil 4:13), certainly has been well-used throughout history. I'm reminded by the verses preceding this, which tells me that God will provide all that I need and I should not be afraid because I CAN do all things through Christ who strengthens me. Christ took this message to the cross so he could prove to us that Love and Life win.

Finally, I get held up by my own insecurities at time and need some help. Christ himself appealed to God. The difference was he overcame and kept his commitment under absolute duress. When I was 17 and completely out of my element in basic training for the army, I thumbed through a pocket bible and found, 'Commit thy way unto the Lord, trust in him, and this too shall come to pass' (Psalm 37:5). Simple, but absolutely comforting. The most incredible blessing beyond my baptism that I've ever

received is my family. You see, they are the friends mentioned in this devotional. It is they who keep my eyes focused on Christ. We all must come together to fully become wholly unleashed. God bless you all.

**God, Help us to discover new ways to live our lives "In Christ" and always be inspired by the people and passages that help guide the way.
Amen.**

Christian Holgard



Unleashing ALL

Thursday, March 14

Romans 10:12: For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him.

My friend, Tony Lucero, was dealt a terrible hand in life. In 2013, he was diagnosed with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, ALS. You may remember the “Ice Bucket Challenge” that raised money for ALS in 2014. Millions were raised, boosting research tremendously. Unfortunately, ALS is not yet a curable disease. Tony passed away from complications of ALS in November 2018. I so miss his beautiful smile and his amazing zest for life.

In my conversations with Tony (he was not able to speak but communicated through an eye-tracking computer system), we talked about how he came to Abiding Hope. Tony and his partner, David, did some searching for a church that welcomed them. They found a home at Abiding Hope, just as I and many others have over the years. When I asked Tony what about Abiding Hope resonated the most with him, his answer was immediate: “All means All!” Identifying as a gay couple had made finding a church family difficult, but Tony and David felt like included, loved, and treasured members of our “family.”

This aspect of our Abiding Hope “DNA” is one of my favorites, too. As a musician and performer, many of my friends fall somewhere on the LGBTQ spectrum. Most of them have been excluded or vilified by faith communities at some point, and as a result have a very negative view of church. I appreciate those times when I have been able to tell them that my faith community is not that way! Abiding Hope accepts and includes ALL people.



Tony remained active on social media even as his disease made his life so very difficult. One of his favorite verses was Ephesians 6:18-19: “Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the Gospel.” Tony continued to pray for his friends and family, being the heart of Jesus as he was able. As he said, “One thing ALS will never take away from is my ability to pray.” I am so thankful to have known Tony, to witness his amazing spirit and strength throughout his battle with ALS. I am also very thankful that our faith community includes all, wholly unleashing all of us to live into our full potential!

Loving Lord, thank you for our brother Tony. Thank you for the gift of your son, Jesus, who showed us how to love unconditionally, without restrictions or limits. May we continue to welcome all people. Amen.

Heather Davis

Change a Tire, Change a Heart

Friday, March 15

Micah 6:8: He has told you, O mortal, what is good and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?



Oftentimes, we formulate opinions about people and are quick to make judgments, when in reality we know nothing about them. I am afraid I am as guilty of that. Some of you might know that I am a big workout guy. I'm in the gym every morning before 5:00 AM, sometimes even twice a day, for my workouts. Earlier this summer, I was doing my workout and I noticed an older lady at the gym just sitting in one of the lounge chairs as if she was waiting for someone. I did not give it much thought at first, but there she was day after day, coming into the gym and basically just sitting! I often wondered what she was doing there.

One day, I came in to the gym at my usual time, and there she was, standing at the check-in counter, asking everybody who came in if they had a portable air compressor. I thought the request odd, but abruptly told her no. As I went to put my things in a locker, it occurred to me that maybe she had a flat tire. So, when I came out of the locker room I went up to her and asked her, "excuse me, but do you have a flat tire? I don't have a compressor but if you have a spare, I will gladly help you change your tire." She was overwhelmed with joy and relief. I learned that her name was Mary and ever since her husband passed away 2 years earlier, life hadn't gone well for her. Her car was old and beat-up. I think she had every worldly possession she owned in her car. It took me 10 minutes to get to the bottom of her trunk to even get to her spare! I learned a lot about Mary over the next 30 minutes. Where she was from, how long she and her husband were married, about her children, and how she'd ended up in her current circumstances. She told me her story. We all have one, right? The story gets better from here.

Generosity can be contagious. Many of the people who ignored Mary and her request for help were friends and acquaintances of mine. When I asked them for help to loosen a lug nut or for a sledge-hammer to remove the tire rim that seized to the axle, they were willing to help. I could tell they felt good about it too. We got Mary's tire changed and she went on her way. She tried to offer to pay me something but I refused.

I didn't see much of Mary after that. Then, recently, I was finishing up my exercise routine, and guess who walked into the gym? "Mary," I said, "Happy New Year." She acknowledged me, holding up her hand and pointing her index finger as if to say "wait a second." She turned around and walked out of the gym, only to return 2 minutes later with a beautiful gift basket that she put together for me for Christmas. It said "To: Frank Virginia" (I never told her my last name) "From: Santa Express." The card read, "I know you have been good all year, Merry Christmas." I was so surprised; it brought me great joy. After all those months, she still thought of me. Just one Child of God, in community with another.

Lord, help me to see with your eyes what you see in each of your children, and to live in community in way that creates real life for all. Amen

Frank Virginia

Be Strong in the Lord

Saturday, March 16

Ephesians 6:10: Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.

Most scholars agree Ephesians is a letter written by the Apostle Paul to the Christian community in Ephesus. He urges them to unite as one body in Christ and to follow His example in how to live their lives. The sixth chapter stands as perhaps the most familiar, as Paul strongly encourages them to “Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power” and put on the full armor of God to protect against evil and darkness. At that time, of course, the Christian community suffered tremendous persecution. This text has become very personal to me and has been central to me starting the process of becoming unleashed.

At the age of 21 I was employed as a nursing assistant at Stanford University Medical Center in Palo Alto, CA. As a student at St. Olaf College in Minnesota, I had been deliberating between pre-med and pre-nursing. I was extremely fortunate to land this summer job in such a stimulating clinical center. A year earlier at the tail end of my sophomore year, I had been blind-sided by sudden symptoms of double vision and significant right leg weakness. I was soon diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis, a potentially debilitating neurological disease. It was a shock, as I had lived a charmed life with excellent health and athletic ability. While I continued my academics, I was hospitalized twice to receive IV steroids during that first year for new symptoms, and each time regained some but not all function that had been impaired. I began my dream job with optimism, convinced my health issue would settle down and I'd be the MS patient that would end up with little or no disability. A month later, numbness crept into my right hand, and in just a few days, I lost complete coordination from my elbow down and developed double vision again. Unable to continue working, I was overcome with discouragement and fear regarding my future. Four debilitating exacerbations in 16 months was foreboding. My Godsend: I resided with three outstanding young women in a house near campus, all strong Christians, who had just graduated from Stanford and were pursuing their respective careers. The four of us became close quickly, and four wonderful Christian young men lived next door and joined in as strong supporters during this challenging time. One of my housemates, Lori, was a talented vocalist and guitar player. She wrote a song using the words of Ephesians 6: 10-17, and the refrain was “Be strong in the Lord.” She played it for me often that summer, and these words became my mantra. This, together with my friends who reminded me God was in control, provided a tremendous sense of hope and peace.



If I were to point to a time when I felt truly unleashed, this was it. Usually I am a person who struggles to “let go and let God,” but this time I submitted completely because I was so powerless on my own. I felt led to return home to Minneapolis where I was hospitalized, and this time emerged symptom free. The next few years I experienced more exacerbations, but over time I became stronger and felt peace about my future that began that summer. I successfully completed college on time with a nursing major, added two master's degrees, enjoyed a fascinating and stimulating career, married, was blessed with two beautiful children, traveled the world, and accomplished things I imagined impossible. While I constantly struggle to unleash myself (it is a lifelong process), this reminds me how much power God can provide if we get out of the way.

All-powerful and all-knowing God, remind us to look to you as we grapple with different challenges in our lives, from small to large. You know what we need far better than we do. When we unleash ourselves and relinquish control, we can experience peace and hope that is truly beyond our understanding, and accomplish things beyond our imagination. Amen

Julianne Adams

Be Still

Monday, March 18

Psalm 46:10: Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth.

Truth be told, I'm not very good at being still. I'm always on the go, my mind constantly running. My to-do lists and continual need to be productive are my constant companions. When I am sick, normally caused by my inability to be still, my husband has to all but force me to rest. Over the years, I've come to accept this as part of who I am, but lately I've been wondering, is there more to life than this?

This past year was one of the busiest of my life. We grew our family and welcomed Lucas. My husband took a new job two weeks after Lucas was born. We moved the week before Christmas just a few miles down the road. My grandfather's COPD began to flare up and transitions between hospital and rehab became his new reality.



Looking back, I took the moments of rest and silence for granted. If 2018 taught me anything, it's to be grateful when life seems mundane, predictable, and a little too routine. Because there's an inherent gift that lies there- an invitation to be still and experience God's abundant love. And this gets at the true core of why I'm not very good at being still. I'm caught up in believing that somehow I am the creator of my own little universe, I am in control, and that it's all up to me. When in reality, my true source of being is grounded in God because I am a beloved daughter of God. And this is true not because of what I do, but because of who I am.

This past year was an invitation to be unleashed from busyness, to say no to things that don't give life and yes to things that encourage me to thrive. These days, I seek out down time for rest and rejuvenation. For it's in those moments of grace where I am able to sit with God and just be. Be fully who I am, and be unleashed from the chaos that is modern day life. And here is where I experience a profound gratitude and thankfulness for God's gift of life, busyness and all.

Dear God, draw us into rest, so that in your presence we may fully experience your extravagant love and grace. In your stillness, may we trust in our identity as your beloved daughters and sons. Amen.

Pastor Laura Bostrom

Wholly Unleashed Through Forgiveness

Tuesday, March 19

Colossians 3:13: Bear with one another and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgives you.

“The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.” The first time I read this quote from Gandhi, I thought it was a bit harsh. Forgiveness isn’t always that cut and dry. Was it really a fair statement? But as I further contemplated, I realized the depth of truth of what he was saying. Holding on to grudges and grievances no matter how big or small keep us trapped and unable to live free. We carry around inside of us the constant pride, hurt, disappointment and pain of being injured by someone else. We repeat to ourselves “we are right, and they are wrong.” We believe that if we “forgive,” we are somehow giving power away or condoning an action by another. Forgiveness has nothing to do with either of those things. Forgiveness is about letting go, freeing ourselves, and moving forward.

For much of my childhood and early teens (before my parents divorced) my father parented through verbal and physical intimidation. When you are experiencing this kind of environment or relationship with a parent through all your developmental stages, you are unaware of the actual damage it is doing because you are only looking for how to cope and survive and how to get away from it. Eventually, I finished college and later married and moved to Atlanta and then here to Littleton. During my late twenties and early thirties, I had become a mother and vivid memories of my childhood came to the forefront of my mind. I became very angry and resentful in a way that I had never felt before. It consumed much of my thoughts and emotions. I started to realize I’d really never dealt with the trauma of my past. Even that made me mad. Now, I was going to have to deal with this again. But as I prayed, discerned, and processed, I slowly realized what I really needed to do was to forgive my father for his actions. This took a very, very long time. But I knew that if I did not forgive, I would never be free, wholly unleashed, to live the life God had created and intended for me. I could not be whole as a wife, a mother, a friend, and ultimately to live as a child of God. The scars will be there forever but the hold it had over me is no more.

I was vividly reminded about how forgiveness sets you free while I was in Haiti in January. I re-heard a story that I had heard many times before about one of our dear brothers and his life as a restavek- a child slave- for his own aunt. This time when I heard him tell his story, he talked about how he had forgiven his aunt for what she did. I started to wonder if he had not chosen to forgive and let go of the despicable and inhuman things that were done to him would he be living this full, beautiful, servant life that he does now? I don’t know. He chose God’s story, not the world’s, and lives and serves in the fullness of God. Jesus taught us that we are at our weakest when we continue to live in a place of insecurity, pride, resentment, and fear. We are strongest when we live out of vulnerability, humility, grace, and love. If we don’t forgive others, and also very importantly forgive ourselves, we will forever be held back from the life of joy, compassion and love that God wants to fill us with so we can go share with others in their suffering. Only by embracing and practicing this vision of forgiveness, God gave us through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus will we be able to begin to live wholly unleashed.

Gracious God, give us strength to let go and forgive those who injure us. Give us a generous spirit to be able to move forward and be transformed through our pain to be a blessing to others.

Cindy Johnson



Unleashed In the Midst of Pain

Wednesday, March 20

2 Corinthians 1: 3-4: Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God.

I've had a constant, unremitting headache since I woke up on October 28, 2013. I've had MRIs, lumbar punctures, EEGs and every other test you can imagine. I've tried over 40 different medical treatments, from migraine medicine, to Botox, to nerve blocks in my face and neck, as well as plenty of alternative treatments. Nothing has touched the pain. Additionally, in the last few years, I have had an onset of new and worsening symptoms, pain and weakness all over my body, extreme fatigue, dysautonomia—so much else. Sometimes, it feels like my whole body is protesting against some yet undiscovered antagonist. We are working on getting to the bottom of it, adding to the list of acronyms that have become my complex diagnosis, but it's a slow process. Through all of this, my headache remains. There are days when I can't get out of bed. There are times when I miss out on things I'm supposed to be doing and I'm racked with guilt or fear that I am letting people down. Sometimes, I feel so isolated by my illness and where I am compared to where I thought I would be at age 30. It can be overwhelming.

The Franciscan monk and theologian Richard Rohr writes that “Pain teaches a most counterintuitive thing: we must go down before we even know what up is.” Sometimes I struggle to find the way up, to see God in all of this. Now, I've never been angry with God. My understanding of God as the infinite source of Light and Love just doesn't leave room for anger. But I have wondered where God is in my situation. Where is God when we suffer?

Richard Rohr goes on to say, “If there isn't some way to find some deeper meaning to our suffering, to find that God is somehow in it, and can even use it for good, we will normally close up and close down.” I am so afraid of this. I don't ever want my chronic illness to be a reason for me to love less, to give less, or to live less. But on so many days, when I'm in this constant pain, it's very hard. What I try to do is be as open and vulnerable as I can about what I am going through and experiencing and hope that this is enough to lead me out my own moments of darkness and isolation and into some kind of light. I do this in my relationships with family and friends, and I do this by using my writing to turn the lens on my health experiences and share them with a wider audience. It isn't always easy. But this is where I find God is in all of this, day in and day out, when I share my struggles and engage with others in the midst of suffering, This is what keeps me thriving in spite of that nagging discomfort behind my right eye that just won't go away.



Reflect on these words from Black Elk, a Native American sage of the Oglala Sioux, and consider how pain and suffering has brought you closer to others: “Perhaps the most important reason for “lamenting” is that it helps us to realize our oneness with all things, to know that all things are our relatives.”

Stephanie Harper

All Means ALL

Thursday, March 21

John 15: 9: As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Abide in my love.

I have the privilege of leading a Bible study at the independent living community where I live, Concordia on the Lake. The study is open to everyone regardless of religious background. Therefore, we have many denominations represented. We were having a discussion about how God loves everyone no matter the circumstances. God loves God's whole creation, everyone and everything.

One of the women in the group was surprised by this. She had been taught a version of God and Jesus that didn't love everyone, not without conditions. I saw fear in her eyes. I hadn't realized how so many believers in Jesus the Christ were living with such fear. Afraid that if you didn't believe "the right things," then "you weren't a true believer."

There are those who say that God loves everyone BUT... I reflected on what we say often at Abiding Hope: All means ALL. We say it, do we truly believe it or is there a BUT included? God's love is unconditional. God loves us, everyone and everything without conditions, that's grace! All does mean ALL! No BUTS!

God of All, we know you love us, no matter who we are or how we live our lives. Help us to truly believe your unconditional love is for all of your creation. Yes, all does mean ALL. Amen.

Pat Johnson



Angels Among Us

Friday, March 22

Hebrews 1:14: Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?

Being the mother of a special needs child has been a long, lonely, and sometimes terrifying road. It is like walking through a dense, dark forest with no clear path, choosing one direction, only to run into an insurmountable obstacle. Having to change directions and stumble along with no idea which way to go. Lurching from crisis to crisis without a break in between. Sometimes, I have been so lost and afraid that all I could do was sit down and cry.

But somehow, in my darkest times, there have been angels who showed up to help guide the way. For example, the 1st grade teacher who went to special training and “discovered” a new way to test my son, and finding out that he was twice exceptional. There was the special classroom aid in 3rd grade who went out of her way to help him. There was a 5th grade math teacher who made a point to show the entire class my son’s strengths, rather than his weaknesses. There was the middle school social worker who truly understood my son’s disability and helped him to blossom for the first time. There was a high school counselor who went out of his way to be a friend. There was the Scout Master who took a chance on my son and helped him achieve the rank of Eagle Scout. There are Pastors who spent hours of their personal time in conversation with my son. There was a kind man who took him under his wing on a church mission trip to Mexico, and has continued to be a source of support several years later. The list goes on and on. These angels have been there when my son and I both needed them most. I am so grateful to each and every one of them, though they are too many to name. There are times when I am not sure I would have made it without them.



I know personally how much we need each other, and how very difficult it is to ask for help. I encourage us all to keep our eyes and hearts open, and to pray to be shown where we can step in and be an angel in someone else’s life.

**Take some time to consider these lyrics from the song “Angels Among Us”
by Alabama:**

**Oh, I believe there are Angels Among Us,
Sent down to us from somewhere up above.
They come to you and me in our darkest hours
To show us how to live
To teach us how to give
To guide us with a light of love.**

Laurie Fox

Home

Saturday, March 23

Matthew 25: 35: For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.

It was the middle of July in Denver. The intense summer sun made everything hot. My little Subaru had trouble fighting the heat. I pulled up in front of the apartment building near Colfax and saw all the children playing in the courtyard. They were all incredibly friendly and very curious why I was there. I went to the apartment on the second level and knocked. Hussein opened the door and ushered me in. This was my first time being alone with the family and I was a bit nervous about communication. They only spoke Arabic and I knew nothing in Arabic. Little Hussein came running out to play with me. I sat on the floor for him to crawl on me because there was very little furniture. Fatima finally emerged from the bedroom and this was the first time I saw her in her hijab. She looked beautiful, having done her makeup, and was rocking hot pink stiletto heels. Oh, and she was also nine months pregnant balancing on those heels! We packed into my little car and I turned up the air as much as we could.



I was taking them to a medical appointment, one of many they had to attend having newly arrived in the U.S. on an Asylee visa. This was in 2013 when I was a refugee mentor for Lutheran Family Services (LFS). I developed a heart for serving refugees that year after meeting a young man named Ange at the University of Colorado Denver. He escaped the Rwandan genocide, lived in the Congo for two years, had his baby brother die in his arms, and was one of the happiest guys I knew. I loved (and still love) working with refugees. I learned so much about the world and about other cultures without having to afford travel (I was a poor grad student!) A couple of years later, I started working at LFS and became their Communications Manager. I loved all the programs at LFS, but my heart was always with the refugees.

Obviously, there has been a big shift politically and in the media over the past couple of years regarding refugees. As the Communications Manager of the largest Refugee Resettlement Agency in Colorado, I was suddenly thrown into the media spotlight. As a Christian and a Lutheran, I have always been taught to love and welcome others, especially those who need it the most. It was hard to navigate the politics while still fiercely supporting our refugees. This tough time in my life taught me a lot about the ugliness of people and how quick some are to judge people they have never met. And yet, there were also moments of intense gratitude and support. When I arrived at church one weekend after an exhausting, politically infused week, I was surrounded by Pastor Laura, Pastor Doug, and Pastoral Intern Joel. They had been thinking and praying for me, our organization, and all of our refugees. After such an intense spotlight that week, where I faced many threats head on, I walked into church and finally felt safe. I felt what I wanted my refugees to feel.... I felt home.

Dear Lord, how can we create a space and place where everyone feels welcome? Can we have different opinions and still come together and be in community? Please protect those who do not have a safe place to rest their heads tonight. Please give guidance to our policy and decision-makers. In your name we pray. Amen.

Rebecca Burris

Finding Freedom in the Darkness

Monday, March 25

Romans 8: 38-39: For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 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.

July 13, 2015. I'll never forget that date. It was the day I was told I had ocular melanoma – eye cancer. In just five minutes, my life changed drastically. I went in for what I thought was a routine evaluation of a “freckle” in my eye. My retinal specialist had been watching it for a year. Instead, I was told that I had ocular melanoma. The cause? Blue eyes and bad luck. And though the most common form of eye cancer, ocular melanoma is quite rare. Rare and potentially fatal.

Wow.

I felt the bonds of those words grip my heart, my mind, my entire being. I was in a complete fog. I went home and sat on the sofa – I couldn't move. I was wrapped in the fear of what I felt was a death sentence. I couldn't move for nearly a week. Don flew home early from a business trip. A friend in Seattle, who survived Stage 4 breast cancer, immediately offered to fly out. Friends from our life connection group here at Abiding Hope came to see me. And still I couldn't move. I was bound by those words “rare and potentially fatal.” Two weeks later, I was in surgery, having a radiation plaque put into my eye to destroy the tumor. I couldn't be near anyone for the five days it was in place (Don disobeyed and stayed beside me). I was confined between home and the retinal specialist's office.

And the day after my surgery, concern over a potential detached retina kept me sitting upright for a week, night and day, limiting my movements. In the wee morning hours when I was sitting upright, awake and in the middle of the day when

I was alone, I found myself listening to Matt Redman's “Blessed Be Your Name.” Here's an excerpt of the lyrics:

Blessed Be Your Name
In the land that is plentiful
Where Your streams of abundance flow
Blessed be Your name
Blessed Be Your name
When I'm found in the desert place
Though I walk through the wilderness
Blessed Be Your name

Those words unleashed me. I knew God was with me, watching over me. I found a trust I hadn't known before. I found freedom in those lyrics, that music. I listened to them over and over and over. And my fear subsided. I won't say it went away completely, but it no longer confined me. I knew that no matter what happened, God was with me. It was a feeling as tangible as love, more powerful than fear, and more freeing than anything I had ever experienced. The tumor is gone. I have radiation damage in my eye. And I get a liver scan every year to check for metastasis. But my odds are as good as any healthy person. I've been extremely blessed with a fantastic outcome. And I've been unleashed to live my life fully, without fear of what “could” happen. After all, God's got me. God's got all of us.

Dear God, no matter the cause of our fear or our concern, remind us that nothing can separate us from you. Perhaps that's in the care of a spouse, the touch of a friend, or the lyrics of a poem or song. Unleash us from our fear, knowing that you've got us...always.

Judy Leidy



The Chains that Bind

Tuesday, March 26

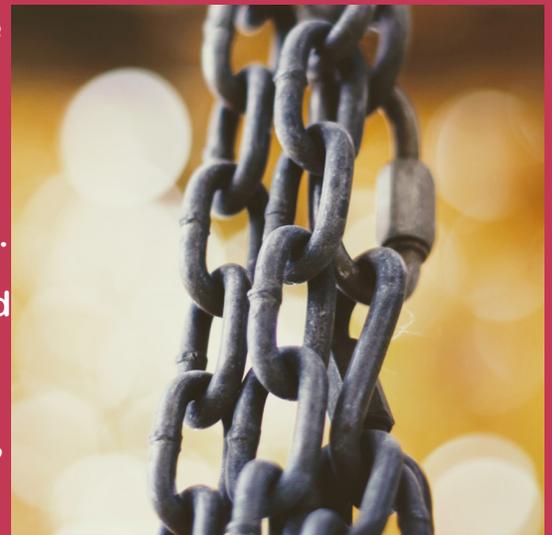
Matthew 11:28-30: Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

There was a time in my life when I had 2 small ADD children and my husband was an active alcoholic. I was absolutely out of control while attempting to control everything and nothing I did helped. I took on everyone else's problems and had no idea what my own problems were. I spent time in the car crying when I should have been paying more attention. I prayed over and over, "God PLEASE give me rest for my soul."

God led me to Al-Anon. At first, I spent a lot of time trying to figure out things that were not my problem. But soon, I learned to embrace the program. So, I went to meetings faithfully and worked the steps. It took me awhile to finally get a sponsor, but I did. And it was there that God gave me rest for my soul.

It was difficult working the steps. I discovered things about myself that I didn't like, and I had to learn to be open and vulnerable, as well as wrestle with painful feelings. I had to figure out how to ask for help. However, I also learned about God's forgiveness and learned how to forgive myself. Eventually, the emotional pain abated, and I found that I was living "happy, joyous and free" as I discovered was the goal. God answered my prayers – I had to do the work, but He provided the insights and the miracle of peace and rest for my soul.

I wouldn't be the person I am today if I had not married an alcoholic. I desperately wanted to be free, but I was bound tightly. It was fear and resentment that held the chains so tight. I believe that God does not want us to be victims, thrown side to side by every situational difficulty that hits us. He wants us to be the people that He created us to be, wholly unleashed from the chains that have us bound up. He wants us to have His peace and to be standing on solid ground when adversities come. Then, with Him, we can come out on the other side, not just surviving but thriving.



Healing God, walk with us as we are faced with adversities and give us Your Peace. Unleash us from the chains that bind us. Help us listen to Your voice that leads us to find rest for our souls. Amen

Shirley Johnson

Hills and Valleys

Wednesday, March 27

*Proverbs 3:5-6: Trust in the LORD with all your heart
and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him,
and he will make your paths straight.*

“What has brought you Joy?”

My joy comes from my family, nature, and music. I see God in and through those aspects of my life. The laughter of my daughters when they are together and the humor we have as a family that only each of us “gets.” The love of my husband as he looks at me, the girls when they smile, and the warm eyes of our trustworthy dog, reflect the light of God. My family has now grown exponentially with my new church family. I am inspired by my co-workers in seeing what they do with unconditional love. They have embraced me and walked beside me in my new role. When I walk through the trees and look up to see the sun shining through the branches, streaming beams across the forest floor, my heart also beams. When I gaze at the sky and see rays of light breaking through the clouds, I say “look, there is God shining down.” I feel closer to God when I am surrounded by the beautiful natural world he created.



I have been blessed to have had music in my life for as long as I remember. My father instilled that into me at a young age. I love listening to different styles and lyrics and find inspiration in finding verses that resonate with me. Over the past year, the song “Hills and Valleys” by Tauren Wells has defined me:

“In the valley, I will lift my eyes to the one who sees me there
When I’m standing on the mountain aft,
didn’t get there on my own
When I’m walking through the valley end, no I am not alone!
You’re God of the hills and valleys!”

I will never forget when my daughter played it on the piano for me. It brought tears to my eyes and I knew that song was for me. Over this past year I have been presented with many hills and valleys. My go-to verse in my head has been “trust in the Lord with all your heart.” I say that to myself over and over in hopes that I would believe it. I had to believe that God had a plan for me, but when would I know? How would I know? Was my plan the same as his? “Lean not into your understanding; in all your ways submit to him.” I found that once I truly did that, things began to fall in place. I can only thank God for listening to my prayers and leading me in the right direction.

Lord, remind me to trust in you and know that you will help me through the Hills and Valleys of life, for you, God, have a plan for us all.

Dana Hess

Living Into the Mystery through Prayer

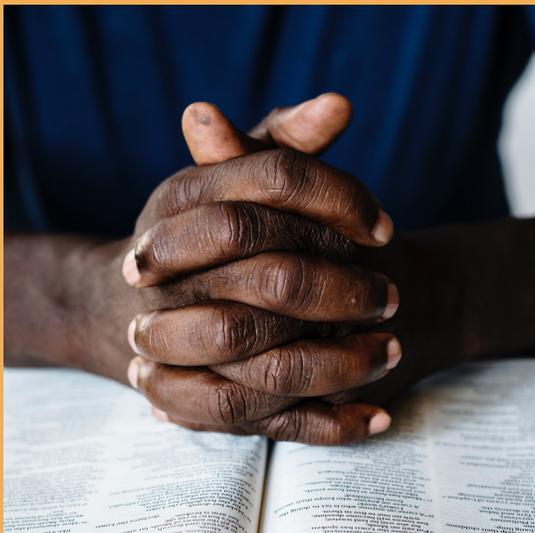
Thursday, March 28

Psalm 62.2: He alone is my safe place; his wrap-around presence always protects me. For he is my champion defender; there's no risk of failure with God. So why would I let worry paralyze me, even when troubles multiply around me?

Prayer has been a part of my daily adult life for several years. It wasn't always this way; it took a trying and difficult time to bring it into focus. Prayer is now my "alone" conversation with Jesus, for help in managing the mystery of my life. I prefer it best in quiet solitude so that the distractions of my life can be put aside for a bit. Much of the time, my prayers are focused on how I can better apply the gifts I have been given. To be unleashed into a life of serving others.

People I love and those who love me have also taught me to pray in thanksgiving for my blessings and for those of others. And, admittedly (and not at all incorrectly), I sometimes pray for things I want to ease my burdens. Interestingly, I've noticed that answered prayers sometimes come disguised as something or someone else that only the passage of time fully reveals. It is in looking back where the blessings are revealed in the present. This prayer solitude is usually in the dawn of my day or sometimes in the quietness of the early evening. Sometimes it is in the dark wee hours of the night when something awakens me. I remind myself: "Christ Jesus, your light shines within me; let not my darkness or despair speak to me." It is a fierce struggle to want to give up or run away, instead of giving in and turning towards Jesus. Prayer is a bedrock to living fully into the mystery of life. Every human being stands uniquely alone in life's mystery. No other person will completely feel like we do, think like we do, or act like we do. As much as our human family and community may help us or abandon us at times in this journey, hear Jesus call your name and it will feel like love, like home. Our life is not a mystery to him, but a daily revealing to us.

In Paul's letter to the disciples in the city of Philippi, he instructed them to not fret or worry. I also remind myself of a recent feature film, "Bridge of Spies," where the captive prisoner is asked by those working to negotiate his release if he is worried. His reply was, "Would it help?" Worrying is wasted energy. Instead of worrying, pray. Be unleashed from all that binds. Pray hard and often, simply and plainly. It is essential for our lives. Lift concerns to God in Christ Jesus, in a context of praises for all God has done and promises to do in his wholeness with creation.



God, Source of All Light, remind us in our prayers of your light that shines in our darkness. Help us be honest about our lives, warts and all. Enter in, Jesus, shine your light. When we find our wounded selves wilting in mistrust, may we instead rest in both your living example and loving promise. Amen

Doug Phelps

Joy Unleashed

Friday, March 29

Psalm 47:1: Clap your hands, all you peoples; shout to God with loud songs of joy.

One of my favorite things is when my sister and I take our dogs to the dog park. On a sunny Saturday morning, the park is brimming with a wide array of dogs and their owners. We unload our two fur babies from the car and head to the gated area. Both of them are excited, tails wagging and tongues out. We enter the enclosed space and unclip their leashes. The big one, a Siberian husky named Asha, takes off the second her leash is unclasped. She runs the perimeter of the fence, sniffing, her tail high in the air. She lets out a deep, excited bark at her newfound freedom. She engages the other dogs playfully. She is so overjoyed to be out and unrestricted, to run and play and just be a dog. I would go as far as to say you can actually see the smile on her face.

The little one, Cher, is another story. She's half Chihuahua and half cattle dog, an odd blend that leaves her head looking a bit too small for her barrel chested body. As soon as we let her off the leash her Chihuahua side emerges, in all its nervous and neurotic glory. She stays at my side, afraid to venture too far away. She snarls at the friendly dogs who bound over to say hello. She is simply not enjoying herself. But, if we're lucky, after a while she will get up the courage to amble away and explore. She will catch up to her joyous companion and they will conquer the dog park together, a little pack of pleased pups, unleashed and uninhibited.

I'm sad to admit that I am often more Cher than Asha. I know in my head that I have been freed from the constraints of fear by a God of love and life. I want to clap my hands, to sing, to run and welcome each joyous moment fully unhindered. But instead, I step back and wait for disaster, snarl at anyone who might get too close because I could get hurt if I make myself open and vulnerable. But just like Cher, there are those moments, those glorious moments, when I open myself up to the joy that is simply being present in God's promise of love and life, and my heart bursts with the fullness of it. It might not happen every day, but I can go through my daily life knowing that every moment has the capacity for great joy, if I only open my heart and trust that all things are possible, that God's love is in me and all around me, and that, as Emily Dickinson once wrote, "the mere sense of living is joy enough."

I composed this brief poem, "This Joy," thinking about how I might welcome joy into my life more frequently. Take a moment to meditate on the words. Where will you seek joy today?

**I long for the capacity
to open my heart to
a great joy,
like the flowers
open to the morning light,
the leaves extend green,
growing with the
weight of water.**

**I long for this joy,
not simple,
not artificial,
but as natural as
streaks of orange
paint the dawn sky.**

Stephanie Harper



Repentance

Saturday, March 30

Luke 15:10: Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

When I was in high school, I was a three-sport athlete. I used to spend a lot of time in our fitness center and I used to stare at the same motivational poster during my workouts. I looked at it so often, that I memorized the quote by Frank Outlaw:

“Watch your thoughts; for they become words.
Watch your words; for they become actions.
Watch your actions; for they become habits.
Watch your habits; for they become character.
Watch your character for it will become your destiny.”

I didn't know it at the time, but this poster is all about repentance, a key theme in Lent and Luke's Gospel that we journey through this year in our scripture readings. Repentance in Greek means “change of mind,” and as this quote reminds us, changing our thinking can lead to an entire revolution of our being.

One of the sports I was training for was basketball. When I was a young girl, I was the tallest girl on the team and would play down in the post. All I had to do was get open for a pass down on the block and shoot an easy “bunny shot.” I got a lot of points this way. However, by high school the other girls grew taller than me and I became a guard who never quite developed ball handling skills or the strength and confidence to shoot an outside jump shot. I was always afraid of messing up. I remember complaining to an old coach in the fitness center, probably right under that poster. “I miss not playing in the post,” I whined, “I hate basketball now.” Coach looked at me and simply said, “Why don't you start by thinking of yourself as a Guard. Maybe you will start playing like one.” Those words stuck with me. The next summer I went to a basketball camp and when they asked us to split into focused position groups, I went with the shooting guards. I worked on my outside shots and tried to strengthen my left-handed dribble. When my final season of varsity basketball rolled around, I loved playing as a guard. I felt free to try new things and learn from my mistakes. I would even work with my other teammates to execute the plays quickly so we could all have opportunities for that outside jump shot that I never used to take.



Changing how I thought of my identity as a basketball player changed how I played the game and how I acted as a leader on the team. Lent is a time where we can repent and change our mind about who we are and what position we want to play in the game of life. We already know our identity is that we are all children of God. The question is, do we really think of ourselves as God's beloved children? Do we act like children of God? If we think of ourselves as beloved, we will act as love in the world. If my coach were a pastor, he would simply answer, “Why don't you start thinking of yourself as a beloved child of God? Maybe you will start playing like one.”

Renewing God, Change our minds to be set on you. Sometimes we forget who we are. Grant us compassion and grace to learn from our mistakes. Give us courage to live as your children in this world. Amen.

Pastoral Intern Makayla Dahleen

What Can We Do?

Monday, April 1

Proverbs 3:5-6: Trust God from the bottom of your heart; don't try to figure out everything on your own. Listen for God's voice in everything you do, everywhere you go; He's the one who will keep you on track.

It had been a beautiful day, but now it was time to tidy up the office and go home. I loved being in private practice in Green Mountain. The phone rang, and although I was almost out the door, I took the call. All I could hear was a sobbing woman. I quickly recognized the voice as the mother of a teenage boy I had been seeing in therapy. He was pulling at the phone and trying to give me notice that a fourth suicide had occurred at the local high school. I couldn't believe it, and I kept telling myself that this had to be a mistake. But it was true. Calls continued to come in consistently for the rest of the week. A community had been devastated by grief.

I attended a church that was located next to the school where the tragedies had occurred. This place of worship donated a large room and invited me to hold a meeting once a week for anyone desiring to get help and process the grief. A large crowd gathered for ten weeks. We comforted one another, helped folks of all ages process their sorrow, answered questions and ultimately faced the question:
What can we do?

Two friends and I moved from the question: What can we do? To the statement: We must do something! The original thought was to have a walk/run for the purpose of giving this neighborhood an opportunity to support one another. If any money was donated, we would find somewhere to give it. In the meantime, we would be performing a ritual of love and support for grieving parents, grandparents, teachers, and neighbors. It was my responsibility to locate a non-profit somewhere in the US to which we could donate any money received from the walk/run. For weeks, I investigated, but I was constantly hearing the words in my head, "The kids need this money." This thought seemed ridiculous, but God had a plan in mind. Slowly, I began to identify a mission and a program. The newly named Second Wind Fund was a God thing without a doubt. Still, everything within me resisted sharing it with the co-founders and anyone else. Why? I knew that the idea would be scorned.

A few weeks following the first Walk/Run, I was sitting in the office of Green Mountain High School waiting to meet with the principal and possibly a few counselors. I wanted to leave! The voices of those telling me that this mission and program wouldn't work were getting louder in my head. "Dr. Laird....we can see you now." The next hour I attempted to explain how we (SWF) could assure this school that we had enough money to provide counseling sessions to any student in crisis for the remaining part of this semester. When I left the campus with the sense that maybe the need and mission had been understood and accepted, I knew that my life had changed forever.
Was this what it meant to be unleashed?

We had only just begun. Within days, calls were flooding in from other high schools and even some elementary schools. I remember waking up every morning wondering who would be needing help and where would we find the money. The calls for help continued. The challenge was securely in place. There was a need born out of grief.

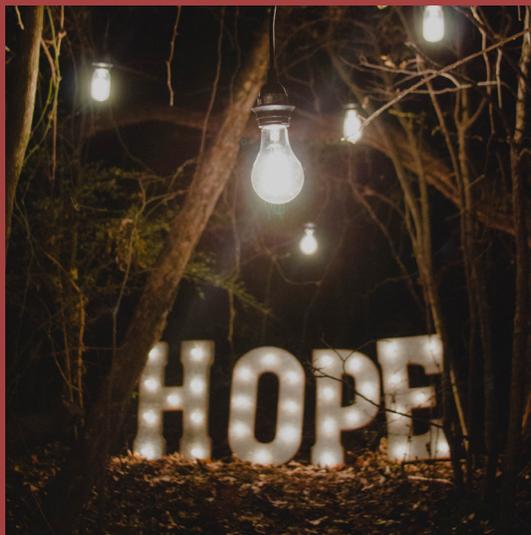
There was a community that wanted to make a difference. There was a mission: remove ALL barriers from youth needing help when in crisis. There was a program designed completely by God. There was an individual (me) who recognized the need, BUT I was hesitant and affected by the criticism and discouraging comments. And then God took off the leash and there were miracles, helping hands, dedicated volunteers, and extraordinary gifts.

Days of denial, processing, searching and often resisting
Still the suffering of many screamed out and could not be muffled.
The piercing question: Who will be next? What child will we lose?
Give the money to the children... Give the money to the children.
These senseless words slowly transformed into
Remove ALL barriers...Remove ALL barriers.

The plan and design from God unleashed freedom and wholeness for many. I was faced with the beautiful reality that I did not need a leash anymore because the plan had been designed by God and the path prepared by Him. There were lives being saved. Lives continue to be saved day after day – year after year.

Dear Lord, may I look for your hand at work and listen to your words rather than relying on my own understanding. Release me from doubt and fear. I pray that I might always look into your encouraging eyes and hear your comforting words, “I’m unleashing you now. The road may be a bit challenging at times, but I am with you! Now Go for it!” Thank you, Lord. In Jesus name. Amen.

Marjorie Laird



Unchained From the World

Tuesday, April 2

Luke 18:22: Now, when Jesus heard these things, he said to him, Yet lack you one thing: sell all that you have, and distribute to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven: and then come, follow me.

Life is about the “what’s next?” We spend our entire life looking forward to the next thing we can do; the next “chapter.” We orient our lives for the future, and each tiny move is planned out to help us be “successful.”

I remember a couple years ago, my mom had picked me up from an after school drama club practice. I practiced in Arvada, so it was a long drive home. It had been a long day, and mid-afternoon the clouds unleashed, allowing pouring rain to fall. It was still coming down when I finished my rehearsal. I was tired, and pretty grumpy. The weather just made it worse since it was cold and wet. As we were driving home, traffic was bad and we took the back way through a neighborhood. We were at a stoplight in a rundown area.



Catty corner to our car was an older house. In the yard there was a man. It was hard to gauge his age, but he was probably in his 40s. He simply stood there, in the pouring rain, with his arms out, smiling and laughing while staring up at the sky. I will never know the reason this man was filled with so much joy or why he chose to stand in the pouring rain. However, I like to think he was just truly happy to see it rain.

At the time, in my mood, I could not understand why anyone could possibly want to stand outside in the cold. But now, looking back, I see an example of what it means to truly live in that man. What if, instead of always looking ahead and getting caught up in the idea of success and money, we lived in the “now” and took time to look at the world through a different prism? What if we appreciated the little gestures and the beautiful things God has created, like that man enjoying the rain? What if we stopped only focusing on ourselves and started to focus on people around us? What if we let go of our “wants” to allow ourselves to be fully unleashed to live in the plan God has for us?

I believe this is all possible. But we must learn to let go of our own selfish desires, and simply LIVE for God’s plan. In the passage, Jesus asks the man to sell his belongings and follow him. So, what are the “belongings” that hold you back from purely being in God’s presence and following his plan? What part of success chains you to worldly living and how can you unchain yourself from the world to LIVE for God?

Guiding God, help us to do Your will and let go of our own desires. Be with us on this journey of learning how to truly live into Your plan. Amen

Delaney Lim

An Unexpected Moment

Wednesday, April 3

Psalm 46:10: Be still and know that I am God.

My life, it seems, is a series of days moving from one to the next, to the next... never pausing much to take stock of everything that is going on around me. And I enjoy that thoroughly. My call here at Abiding Hope lends itself to that – it fuels and fills me. I've had people say "I don't know how you keep track of all that you do. Aren't you exhausted?" And my answer is honestly "no, I'm not." Granted, there are times when I come home and I'm wiped out, but it doesn't happen very often. I am energized by it and fulfilled beyond measure.

But there are times when I KNOW that I need to slow down, to take time – not only for myself to be able to rejuvenate, but also to be able to reconnect with my family and to find peace within. I get so wrapped up in the details of everything, that I lose focus on what's really important. Last fall, we had a staff retreat up in Breckenridge, and the majority of the day was spent outside. We had to spend time, some together, but other times alone – not just a few moments, but a long time, alone – connecting with nature and listening. I love nature – just love it. But thinking of spending time alone, without anyone to talk to and nothing to do, was a little overwhelming. What would I do with myself? That's what I wondered as I went off onto the trail. But, the more time I spent just walking or stopping and taking in the view – and breathing, just breathing – the more my soul settled, and peace descended upon me – both within and without. It helped to unleash me from the details that take up so much of my life – completely. And that takes great risk for me to do that – to completely let go, to allow myself to just take the time to breathe in and breathe out and breathe in again. At one point, as I walked along the trail, I came upon a stump. I sat down on it and suddenly felt compelled to write. The words just fell from my pencil onto the page. I didn't have to force them, they just happened.

An unexpected moment

I met a stump today.
It was just sitting there...
minding its own business
along the trail –
and I was minding mine as I walked along.
Out of nowhere,
for no apparent reason,
it invited me to sit...
to breathe...to take a moment...
to stop the mad rushing
that usually accompanies my days...
to pause... reflect.
enjoy the view,
the peace,
the breezes kissing the evergreen bows...
to listen.
And I did...
and heard the voice of God.
-Sept. 17, 2018



Lord God, sustainer of all life and breath, thank you for the beauty that you saw fit to create outside the walls of the little lives that we make for ourselves. Thank you for providing the opportunities and reminders in our lives to just breathe – breathe you in, wholly, completely – and for giving us the space to always remember that if we just stop a moment and listen, your voice is always there, and always will be. In your name, Amen.

Cathi Thelen

Helping Those Who Need It

Thursday, April 4

Psalm 71:9: Do not cast me away when I am old; do not forsake me when my strength is gone.

Life is funny. Not always funny as in laughter, although that is one of my favorite parts.

Life is funny in how we perceive things as we grow. As Christians, we try to show empathy to those around us who are struggling. But I am finding more and more every day that even though we try to imagine what people are going through, it is very hard to truly understand until you are in that situation yourself.

When I was young, I used to see toddlers throw tantrums in the grocery store and I thought, "My kid will never do that. I won't allow that kind of behavior." As all of you parents know, that is downright hilarious. Those toddlers have a mind of their own and every one is different from the next. Just when you think you have them figured out, they have a birthday and their behavior changes...or you give birth to another that is totally different and doesn't respond to the same discipline you put in place with the first. Then there are teenagers. For the love of all things holy, they are the greatest puzzle you'll ever try to solve. With their independence and their attitudes, their alliance with their peers and their distancing from you...you find that trying to teach and guide them is harder than ever before. Because you are no longer the one they depend on for their every need.

Now, I'm in a new stage of life. Recently, we moved my father into assisted living. This has not been an easy transition by any means. This is the man I used to depend on.

Now we are in a place where he is needing to depend on my siblings and me. While I have watched others go through this and struggle, I felt for their plight but had no idea the difficulties they were facing.

My dad gave up driving but still had multiple doctor's appointments to get to and no way to get there. He'd call my siblings and me for help to get a ride even though we all live in different states. We found a senior center willing to give him rides but they wouldn't cross county lines. He had cellulitis on his legs and was supposed to put a device on his legs every day for a few hours to decrease the swelling. He was unable to physically apply this device and then he would be lectured for his noncompliance. And then there were the falls where he had to call 911 to have the firemen get him up.

He's 6'3" and a very large man. When he goes down, it takes some muscle and coordination to get him off the floor. It took some convincing for him to understand that assisted living was necessary. But once he finally came around, we breathed a sigh of relief after he got moved in on a Tuesday. That Thursday night, I got a call from him at 11:00pm his time. He had fallen and was struggling around on the floor for 30 minutes until he could find his phone and call me. He didn't have the direct line to the nurses' station and he needed me to call them to come get him up. We now have him settled in with a fall lanyard for them to come when he needs it.

The point I'm trying to make is that there are elderly all over the world grappling with these issues that struggle to overcome these problems by themselves. The help my dad turned to was 1000 miles away. How are these things happening in our own backyard and yet they feel so isolated that the only people they can think to call for help live across the country? Until we started experiencing this, I had no earthly idea how difficult it is for these elderly folks to get the help they need. How can we do a better job of being wholly unleashed and go into our community to help these people, especially if we have never experienced this on our own?

While I can't even begin to say I have an answer for this, I CAN tell you that my eyes have been opened. May we all be able to see these issues in our community and make ourselves available to help whenever we can. I have a high school friend, Bev, who I haven't seen in 34 years. She stepped up to the plate when I asked for help on Facebook and she became a go-to for my father. I couldn't possibly be more appreciative for her willingness to step in and help him—a man she had never met. May we all learn to be a tad more like Bev. May we learn to recognize when someone is in need and do what we can to help them in their struggles.

Dear Lord, we thank you for all of the blessings you give us day after day. But when push comes to shove and we feel the struggles that we just don't know how to resolve, please be with us as you send guidance our way. May we all be open to hear God's call when he asks us to help our friends and neighbors in our community. In your name we pray, Amen.

Sonja Nickels



Blind and Bound

Friday, April 5

John 11:44: The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

Many of you may know, but for those that don't, I used to play the saxophone. Music was much more than a hobby for me. Being a musician was integral to my identity; it was my most natural way of being in the world. But I had to give it up. While there is actually quite a bit to unpack with that, for the sake of this story, the reason I had to give it up was due to the demands of parenting an exuberant little boy.

I entered into a period of grief that, frankly, was not going well. My mood started to deteriorate. It started small, like losing interest in things like TV shows I normally enjoyed, but came to a head one day when I saw the joy drain from my son's face after snapping at him (for essentially nothing as I can't remember what it was even about). I suddenly saw my once personal decline now diminishing the gift of joy my son brings to the world and it broke my heart.

I knew I was grieving the loss of my identity as a musician, but I didn't know how to right the ship as things were only getting worse, not better. I needed help, so I got some. After spilling my story to a counselor, she asked me a simple question, "Have you forgiven your son?" In truth, I never felt animosity or disdain towards my son for giving up music. I never blamed him, never felt like I was holding him in a state of un-forgiveness over it. But there I was, feeling my hardened heart turn soft with compassion as I embraced forgiving him. I was living in un-forgiveness whether I knew it or not, whether I liked it or not, and the turning of my heart was the proof.



Living in un-forgiveness left me distant from God's dream for my life. It was a tie that bound me to the downward spiral I was on. Forgiveness is indeed powerful, both healing and liberating. But this is more than a story about forgiveness. It's also a story about blindness. I was blind to the chains that bound me. In order to be unbound, I needed help. I needed someone to show me that which I was blind to. I could not be unbound without the help of someone else. I needed community to be wholly unleashed.

**Lord, open our eyes to that which keeps us bound and help us to hear the words
You speak to us through others.**

Elliott Bostrom

Let Your Hair Down

Saturday, April 6

John 12:3: Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair.

It was my second summer working at Waypost Camp, a Lutheran Summer camp. While our cabin was getting ready to walk to "First Word" before breakfast, a frantic middle school girl stated, "We have a problem."

"What's wrong?" I asked.

She practically shouted, "We don't have a mirror in this cabin! I can't put on eye shadow or mascara!"

I tried to reassure her. "It can be hard to adjust to life at camp, but here at camp we don't need to wear make-up. It's a place where we can let our hair down."

"Then why is your hair in a ponytail?" She shot back.

I explained that "let your hair down" is an expression to say that we are free to be ourselves. "We don't need to stress about how we look or act according to everyone else's expectations. You are free to be you, and you are beautiful just the way you are." "Thanks," she whispered and tossed her make-up bag into her suitcase. A few other girls started to sing the Bruno Mars song "Just the Way You Are" and we wandered off to the dining hall.

During my time as a cabin leader, I tried to help all the campers feel that they could live freely to be themselves even if society tried to tell them otherwise. Scripture has examples of many people freeing themselves so they can be real with those around them. In the Gospel of John, Mary lets down her hair so she can anoint Jesus's feet. Ancient Palestinian women never wore their hair down in public, and sometimes not even in their own home. Mary is unleashing herself to be vulnerable and free with the



people around her. She goes against what is expected of her to show her support of Jesus and his ministry of liberation: she anoints his feet. The feet that will walk to Jerusalem to stand up against the religious aristocracy. The feet that will be pierced with nails to conquer death. The feet that will rise again so that all people will be free to experience real life. Mary's blessing to Jesus' feet is an example of freedom and vulnerability that will bring liberty to others. Camp is a special place where we are free to just be ourselves. I hope that you have places and spaces where you feel free to "let your hair down." I hope you have people in your life that you can "get real with" to say what you mean and mean what you say. May you be wholly unleashed.

God of Freedom, give us courage to live as the beautiful and free people you created us to be. Bless us with places and spaces where we can just be ourselves. Amen

Pastoral Intern Makayla Dahleen

A Way in the Woods

Monday, April 8

Isaiah 55:12: 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.



Mary Oliver passed away this year. She meant a lot of things to a lot of people, a poet of exquisite simplicity and grace. She meant a lot to me. In fact, Mary Oliver is probably the biggest reason I am poet myself.

Mary Oliver had a rough childhood. She lived in a dysfunctional home and suffered at the hands of an abusive father. She was plagued with nightmares. This is why she spent so much time wandering the woods in the area outside her home in suburban Cleveland. Mary found joy and peace in the woods. Mary was at home in the woods. She escaped for hours and hours at a time, reading and writing. It was this foundation that would form so much of her creative work and her ecocentric worldview later in life.

I think about Mary and her woods often because I have been in a wilderness of my own. I live in a dark forest of self-doubt where I can't always see the path in front of me, I can't always see the sunshine above my head. It's hard trudging along this way. It can be scary and shadowy and lonely. I wonder sometimes, did Mary ever feel lost in the woods? I don't think so. I think Mary's woods were a place of solace, a place she could escape the real wilderness of her life, the pain of a difficult childhood and broken family. Mary's woods were a place where she could connect to everything around her, where she could experience the creative love of God in every living thing she came into contact with.

And this unleashed her. This set her free to be who she was meant to be, to write words that inspire so many, help others through their own spiritual wilderness. I know she's helped me.

So, I will continue to try to see the world a bit more like Mary did. I will continue to look for the joy and the wonder and the mystery. I won't be scared of the forest of my own struggles. Instead, I will take a deep breath, smell the pine, and know that God's love is everywhere.

Take a moment to ruminate on these words from Mary Oliver's poem, When Death Comes:

**"When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.**

**When it's over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.**

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world."

Stephanie Harper

Labels are for Jars

Tuesday, April 9

1 John 3:1: See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.

Grandma's basement pantry was full of jars- canned peaches, pears, oatmeal, rice, keys (no one knows what they opened) and buttons meticulously removed from every shirt or blouse that was being retired to the rag bag. Every jar was carefully labeled with masking tape and pen, so you had no doubt what was inside.

We all have labels too. Some we got by family position: Mom, wife, daughter. Some come from other roles: VP, caretaker, guide. Some are adjectives thrust upon us by other people's limited impression of us: the cute one, the smart one, the good girl. Some are cultural: straight, liberal, baby-boomer, vegetarian, middle-class, Christian. Some can even be medical: survivor, asthmatic, anxious. Some labels are super sticky. Hardest to shake are the labels loved ones gave us (whether deliberately or unconsciously) or ones we worked hard to earn through education (e.g. lawyer, doctor, writer) or sport (champion, loser).

Labels tend to be binary—you are or you aren't. You can't put buttons in the key jar! If you are a nerd, you can't be an athlete. If you are smart, you can't struggle with a problem. If you are a "good girl", and you make a bad choice, are you no longer good? If your label is the "funny one," will you ever be taken seriously? If you are identified by your job, what happens at retirement or you find yourself unemployed? Some labels can also be helpful. By categorizing people, we can make sense of the world and quickly navigate new relationships. We get into trouble when what had been roles or adjectives become identifiers—those descriptors that have become so engrained in our psyche that they keep us from thinking or behaving any other way.

Those labels put up boundaries (like the lids of a jar) that keep us from accomplishing great things because our mind says we aren't smart enough or strong enough or talented enough to do the tough stuff. The only time we can become Wholly Unleashed is when we pull off all our labels, all our preconceptions, misrepresentations, limitations of who we are and live our lives under the only label that truly matters—Children of God. There is no label stickier.



Loving God, you named and claimed us at birth. You say that we will do things greater than Jesus, but we often get in our own way of reaching our potential.

Please give us courage to remove our earthly labels so we can live our lives wholly unleashed, boldly proclaiming the only label that matters—Child of God.

Amen.

Lisa Selzler

Serving Wholly Unleashed... Together

Wednesday, April 10

Ephesians 2:10: For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

I have to be honest with you. I find the term 'wholly unleashed' terrifying and overwhelming. When asked to be wholly unleashed, I get in a bit of a panic. How am I going to fit one more thing into my life? Most days, I already can't figure out how I am going to get everything done! I have no time to be wholly unleashed! At Abiding Hope, we are often asked to be wholly unleashed in sermons. I usually sit in my assigned seat on the first base side and kind of nod cheerfully and try



not to panic. I know I am not giving enough of my time, talents, or treasure. I become anxious about how I am going to be able to serve God, my family, and my community better. After years of cheerfully nodding and inwardly panicking, I have realized that I am never going to be able to do ALL that can be possibly done. I just need to do my best to be someone where others see God, and serve the best I can.

I've been honored and blessed to be a part of the Family Promise Ministry for about four years here at Abiding Hope. While I am often seen as one of the faces of this ministry, each host week we have about 100 volunteers serving the families who stay with us four times a year. We are blessed to have several leaders that work to create a well-stocked kitchen and beautiful living and sleeping spaces for our families. We have amazing servants donating toiletry items

for our families as well as pantry and meal donations. We have drivers who bring our families into Denver each morning and drive the families back to Abiding Hope each evening. Every evening during the week, we have 4-6 servants hosting the families and 1-2 servants who will spend the night in the building. Last spring, when I served as a lead coordinator, I had a particularly trying week. I was very tired by the time the families left on Sunday morning. One of the gentleman who had been staying with us noticed that I was tired and he was worried about ME. By wearing myself out during the week, I knew that I was not able to serve to the best of my abilities. I knew that I had provided a disservice to our families and fellow servants by the end of the week. I was really disappointed in myself. It was at this point that I reached out for help. We decided to try things in a different way and take advantage of the amazing group of servants who had already hosted families in the past and really understood what we are trying to accomplish.

We now rely on these leaders each evening during the host week so that (hopefully) we don't have too much of a burden on a few leaders and are able to serve our families and each other in the best way possible.

Understanding that I can't do everything on my own has been a real eye opener for me. Knowing I can do my best at being wholly unleashed by serving together has been a huge blessing for me. It has given me the freedom to say "Yes" to opportunities I never thought possible.

Gracious God, Thank you for reminding me that I don't always have to be in control! Thank you for the times when I am able to serve in community so that things that feel impossible become possible. Amen.

Christine Simcox

Released to Live Fully

Thursday, April 11

Psalm 31:14: But I trust in you, O Lord; I say, "you are my God."

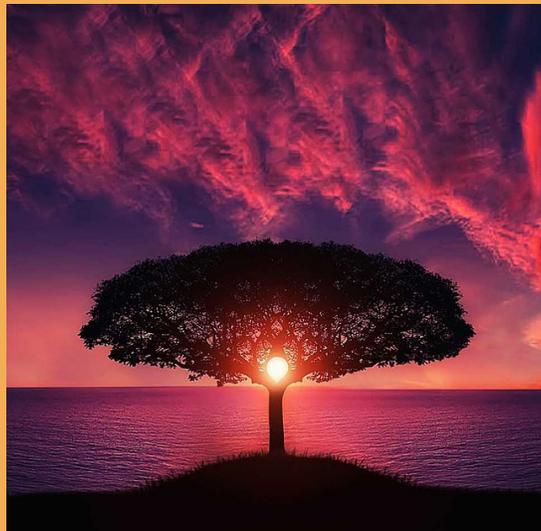
Do you find yourself bound up in fears, negative thinking, constant frustrations, and dread? Life is hard. At times, it can be truly overwhelming job issues, money issues, children issues, health issues, the list is endless. There are times when it seems everything hits at once. Sometimes we need help swimming back to the surface to get a breath of fresh air. Has God deserted us? Is there really a God? Is there really hope for peace and joy in our lives?

Personally, I don't think life was meant to be easy. It has been in my pain, fears and frustrations that I eventually found the God in me, the internal strength which enables me to allow God to make good out of all the difficult "stuff" that happens. I found the God in others that responded to their internal urging to walk with me as I struggled. I found the God in all of creation, in its endless beauty and intricacies. I found the eternal creator God in everything and in that I found peace, hope, joy, and unconditional love among all the "hard stuff." I discovered the Psalms of Lament. Those are the ones where people have poured out all their anger, hurt and frustrations at God only to find themselves resting in the arms of unconditional love and peace in the very God that they felt so distanced from.

It isn't easy to grow through this life, so God gave us each other. It isn't easy to understand how to live in the unconditional love of God, so God gave us Jesus. It isn't easy to release our earthly worries and concerns so God gave us the Spirit to live and work in and through us.

God of Love, help us to let go and believe we are loved and cared for and never alone. Let unconditional love (God) guide us in everything. Amen.

Judy Scherschligt



Living in Authentic Relationships

Friday, April 12

John 4:7: Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.

My mom died suddenly in 2004. I miss her nearly every day. I wish I could just call her up to ask a question or get her motherly wisdom about the happenings in my life. I wish I could just hear her voice.

My mother was a wonderful example to me of living wholly unleashed as an authentic person. My mother was loving, kind, and generous, not just to her children but to everyone. She loved fully and invested in relationships where she could be her authentic self. My mother lived this way every day, no matter where she was or who she was with.

I learned from my mom to live with no regrets. I remember a time a few years before she died. She asked each of us children (there are 4 of us) if there was ever a time that we were hurt by something she or my Dad, had done or said. She apologized to us for not always being the parents they could have been for us. I thought this was so profound but I also so appreciated her just asking this question. We were able to talk about some important things and deepen our relationship as mother and adult child.



Here I am over 15 years later, trying to live my life as an authentic, wholly unleashed child of God. I'm not always good at it. I too, try to live daily as a kind, loving and generous person but I have doubts and fears. It was after mom was gone that authentic relationships really became important to me. I need to surround myself with people willing to let me share my real self with them and they in return to me.

Life is hard and life is short. I need to be in worship to be surrounded by others trying to live this life together. Worship fills me up so I can face the world.

God of Relationship, help me to live as an example of loving kindness in my relationships with others so I can be wholly unleashed in authenticity as a Child of God. Amen.

Donna Phelps

Wholly Unleash Grace

Saturday, April 13

Luke 23:34: Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

It was a sunny day last February. My heart was pounding and carrying a heavy lump at the same time. I dialed my brother's number. After our usual greetings and quick catch up, I cut to the chase.

"I think we should finally talk about Jan."



We were so young, I was four years old and he was about three when we started our almost two-year nightmare at our first daycare. We didn't like to talk about what happened. After almost 24 years since our last personal encounter with child abuse, I finally decided it was time to bring up old memories and wounds so we could heal. Being regularly and violently punished for very petty offenses at a young age taught me a dangerous lesson that goes against everything God has taught us:
That love was conditional.

Out of all the physical and psychological damage I have sustained from her mistreatments, this may be the most harmful to me both spiritually and emotionally. The next two decades, I strived desperately for "perfection" and validity from others in every way, becoming a subdued doormat for anyone I encountered. I showered affection and gifts towards others but was cruel and unmerciful to myself over my own shortcomings. The perception that I had to constantly earn love caused years of struggles for me in developing profound human relationships. The first time I worshiped at this church, Pastor Doug quoted the Luke 23:34 verse, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Jesus prayed these words about the people who were crucifying him- one of the most slow, torturous death sentences ever invented by man. Talk about showing unconditional love!

I don't know why Jan abused all of us kids. Perhaps she didn't even know why. But just like the soldiers and Pharisees that killed Jesus, I prayed to God to forgive her anyways and- as hard as it can be- for me to fully forgive her, too. I also had to learn how to accept and believe the fact that God- and the people who truly matter- love me without ridiculous stipulations. I didn't need to "earn" love- Jesus already loved and forgave me and proved that by his sacrifice and resurrection. If he could show grace to me, I could show it to myself, too.

Lord, please remind me that the gift of your love and forgiveness are free to all. Help me bless you, myself, and the world by showing unconditional love and grace to everyone- including myself. Amen.

Sara Beets

Wholly, Not "Unholy" Unleashed

Monday, April 15

Galatians 5:22-23: By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

During my leadership training several years ago, I created a personal mission and vision statement. I was able to craft and finalize my mission statement over a few months, but it took me years before I was able to put my vision into words. My final vision was simply "to be whole." To me, being whole is not only finding balance and fulfillment of God's vision within myself but also in my brothers and sisters and neighbors. In other words, in God's kingdom, I cannot be whole alone.

When I think about being unleashed, I think of being set free. However, I can unleash anger or fear or resentment towards situations or others in an "unholy" way that does not serve myself or anyone else. In order to be wholly unleashed, I need to free myself of these binds in a way that does not transfer the binds to others. There is no wholeness created when I unleash my burdens at someone else's expense.

Recently, my daughter was driving in a snow storm when her car slid off the road onto a curb and over a sign. No one was injured, and there was minimal damage. However, when she called to tell me about it, I became bound by emotions of fear and anxiety about a much worse accident that never happened. Instead of unleashing her from her fear and anxiety, my feelings emerged in words of anger toward her. I missed the opportunity to create wholeness for both of us by offering "fruit of the Spirit."

I'm hopeful that I'll remember the wholly part of unleashed the next time I feel myself bound by uncomfortable emotions.

Gracious and loving God, when we find ourselves bound by anger, fear, and anxiety, please remind us that in your kingdom, fruit of the Spirit leads to wholeness. Help us unleash our emotions in a way that creates wholeness for all.

Stacia Rumer



Putting Community First

Tuesday, April 16

Matthew 20:26-27: It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave...

When I was asked to put together a devotional this year, I felt I had a nice personal story about giving back to share. I was ready to put my story into words and rest assured that it was, indeed, a nice story.

But time was an issue for me. I had a lot going on at work and then I had a Leadership conference where I tried to tack on a sorely needed weekend with the wife. Then, I had to come back to jury duty. I figured I wouldn't get selected. I didn't really have the time to do it anyway. But, I did get selected: so I have a different story to share.

With jury duty, there are a lot of instructions. You can't try to investigate the case on your own or talk with the other jurors as the trial goes on. The idea is to try and take away any outside influences. As the trial wrapped up, I noticed some things:

- 1) I was immensely impressed with how seriously everyone took their duty and did things like presume the defendant innocent until proven guilty.
- 2) I have no doubt that among our jury there were Democrats, Republicans, and Independents and yet politics didn't play any part as we could all discuss our observations and findings in a civil way.
- 3) In this time of divided rhetoric, I felt energized that this process could work and that if I ever found myself in a defendant position that I'd get the same respect.



As I think about God and the stories we often hear about Jesus and his ministries, we always see Him acting out of a servant mindset. While on the jury, my thoughts were completely based on looking at all the data and considering others (whether the victim or defendant). In taking self and ego out of the equation, just focusing on my duty to others in this case, I was inarguably a better person. I'm not saying that you are unimportant as an individual. But when you put the needs of the community and others above yourself, you'll find that the value you can provide is magnified. This is the type of thing that can allow you to have a "life into the ages!"

Always loving God, please allow me the ability to recognize when I become too self-centered and am taken away from blessing and enhancing your creation. Give me the ability to recognize and act more often in this capacity, and to see the divine in all of us. Finally, help me also to understand that the value is in the act and not the size of the act. Small blessings can have a larger impact and ripple effect than the ones that seem large at the time. Amen.

Mike Betts

Learning to Let Go

Wednesday, April 17

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 that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

We hear regularly that we have been set free and unleashed by Christ to do God's work in the world. But what does that actually look like? How are we supposed to act once we are set free?

To me, being wholly unleashed is permission to do what we are called to do. The difficulty though is just because we have the permission, it doesn't mean we are willing to do what we've been called to do. For that to happen, we have to let go of what is holding us back. Like children learning to swim, we have to jump in the water, but besides just getting in the water, we have to let go of the side of the pool.



That first time we let go of the side is scary. We no longer have anything holding us back, we're free! Still, our first instinct is to quickly reach back for the side, for the comfort of the known and the security it provides. Then we see the others swimming around, splashing and having fun, and we want that, so we let go again and maybe get a little farther from the side. Eventually, we become the people in the deep, beckoning others to join us. Being unleashed is just that to me. It's about showing others what is possible. How we can do real life together. And just like the people splashing around having fun in the pool of life, all we can do is call to those on the side and show them how free we are.

By being set free, we're called to be examples in the world. To show others what it means to live and love fully, to open our arms and embrace those who are different, to show love, mercy, and grace to those who need it most, understanding and patience with the people we disagree with. Letting go and living into our calling, frees those who don't feel unleashed.

Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for sending your Son to show us the way and set us free. Guide us along our paths and remind us to follow those who came before us, showing us the way of freedom and what it means to be wholly unleashed so we can guide those who come after us. In your Son's name we pray. Amen.

Justin Mitchell

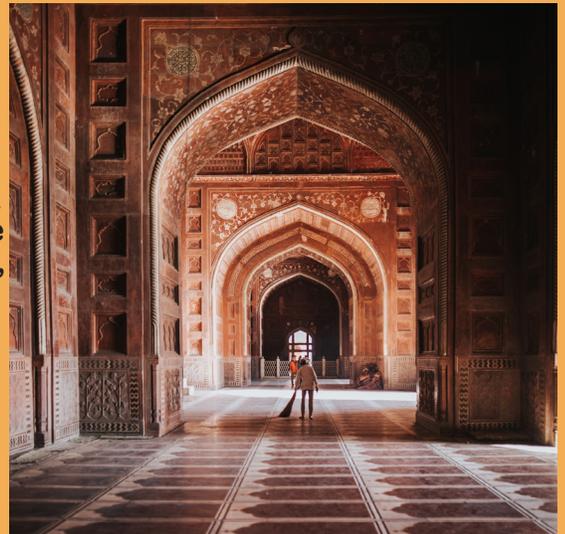
Daily Chores

Maundy Thursday, April 18

John 13:3-5: Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.

Chores never end, do they? As a mom of two, I am amazed at how much there is to do in order to keep up the house. I've never done this much laundry before in my life. Dirty clothes from playing in mud or onesies covered in whatever pureed food there was to eat today. Trash to be taken out, floors to be mopped, dishes to be loaded and unloaded, dinner to be cooked. The list goes on and on. Even with two capable and clean adults in the house, I often find myself doing these things begrudgingly.

There's this quote I've often heard, attributed to Martin Luther, although I've never really been able to put my finger on it. It goes something like this. The person who sweeps their kitchen is doing the will of God as much as the monk who prays, not because the person sweeping is singing a hymn, but because God loves clean floors. Now why in the world would God be concerned about how clean my floors are? Because this is one of the small ways that I am invited to serve my family. Oftentimes, we think that serving one another has to be this big, extravagant thing. But living a life of service to others starts with the people God has put closest in our life. Living as the heart, hands, and feet of Jesus in the world begins with the small acts of service that God invites us into daily. I've found that when I view these daily chores as acts of service, I am invited into a life of gratitude. I'm thankful that I have a house to clean, clothes to wear, and food to eat that dirties the dishes. And out of this gratitude comes a desire to be generous with all that God has given me.



Today marks the triduum, the three days before Easter. We will journey with Jesus from the table, to the cross, to the tomb. Jesus serves his disciples in this beautiful act of love - by washing their feet. Something so simple, yet something so profound.

Jesus invites us today and every day to wash the feet of those we encounter. And oftentimes this washing begins with a simple act of service. May your heart be open to the ways God is inviting you to serve those around you. There are basins everywhere, if only we hear God's call to wash.

Dear God, open our hearts to the movement of your Spirit, and the many basins in our world which call us to serve one another. May we be wholly unleashed, so that all may come to experience your abundant love and grace. Amen.

Pastor Laura Bostrom

The Power of the Presence of Jesus

Good Friday, April 19

John 19: 30: When Jesus had received the wine, he said, "It is finished." Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit."

Good Friday is a day that most people look upon as a somber, dark day. After all, it's a day focused on death. I choose to understand the events of Good Friday as not so much about the death of Jesus, but rather those things that are put to death by the power of the presence of Jesus. As dark of a day as it was, we know the rest of the story – that love and life win! Jesus is restored to life and, by the power of the resurrection, continues to restore life to all creation. Jesus' words, "It is finished" can also be translated "It has been completed." What has been finished or completed is the work that Jesus came to do as the Word made flesh. Jesus came so that all might have life – to put to death all that separate us from God. That is the power of the presence of Jesus.



So what kinds of things did Jesus put to death? I won't begin to list them here but think about those things that have you questioning God's presence in creation. Or those thoughts and feelings that keep you from experiencing God's love, no matter the realities you face. Those are the things that Jesus put to death. I'll admit, there are plenty of moments where I challenge this concept. If Jesus put these to death, then why is there still division, injustice, and fear in the world and in my life? Why do I still experience feelings of doubt, anxiety, and resentment? If Jesus came so that I might have life, then why must I endure days of feeling life-less? I'm sure I'm not alone in struggling with these questions. I believe the answer lies in our ability – and desire – to recognize the presence of Jesus in our lives.

I don't know about you, but one thing that holds me back in life is how much energy I put into wondering what others think about me, as well as my own judgement of others before I fully engage in their presence. I know people inaccurately size me up just as I do them. Now, I can't do anything about people's false assumptions about me, but I can correct my errant behavior. When I fall into these life-less patterns, I take the time to remind myself that we – together – are children of God, and as such, Jesus' presence lives within each of us. When I recognize Jesus' presence within and among us, I enter the moment with a lens for life – that, despite the situation, love and life will prevail. I may still not fully understand how life might win, but I have hope, and that is better than the alternative and believing that death will indeed have the final word. By way of spiritual disciplines, I continually remind myself of Jesus' presence within me, for this is where new life begins. Then, through my relationship with others, I can remind them of Jesus' presence in them. When we recognize the presence of Jesus in our lives, we are unleashed to experience a journey that reveals life as God envisioned.

May we take time today to be reminded of Jesus' presence within each of us so that we may celebrate this day as a day of death – the death of all that might separate us from God and the life that God intended for us.

God of grace, give us the desire and ability to recognize your presence in us and in each other. Amen

Glenn Hecox

God is Dead

Holy Saturday, April 20

1 Cor. 1:23: "but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles..."

Holy Saturday has always been a day that is hard for me to put my head around. In this moment, Christ is dead. Not sort-of dead, not "faking it" with an eye open waiting for Sunday, but truly dead. What also died with Christ were the hopes of so many who followed him as disciples, friends, inspired leaders and more. We are tempted to jump from the drama of the cross to the glory of the resurrection, but there is this... day. This in-between day. A day that we face what it means that our God seems so mortal. And if Christ is fully participating in the Trinity, then something in the Godhead experiences death, a real death. Nietzsche is famous for stating "God is dead" but on this day I always wonder and ponder if this was, or is, on this day, true.



In one way, I think it's wonderful. God, though holy, chose to suffer, to experience what humanity experiences, even death. God doesn't hide from our humanity but embraces it with both hands and renews it, restores it into something beautiful. But I am getting ahead of myself. I believe it's imperative to our faith that we understand that God missed nothing about our human experience, even this scandalous end.

On the other hand, it's frightening. Almost ludicrous. Paul calls this a "stumbling block," something that makes no sense. How can GOD die? What kind of God would humiliate the divine-self so fully? What kind of God is this?

Holy Saturday is this space between fear and wonder. Don't miss the day of the in-between, a day to ponder Christ, fully divine, fully human. Dwell in the fear and wonder of it all.

Be with us now, God, to live into the fear and wonder of this day. Make this time holy. Amen.

Pastor Jay Gamelin

Resurrection of Our Lord

Easter Sunday, April 21

Luke 24:5: Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.

Have you noticed how zombie movies and TV shows have become popular in recent years? In fact, I've had students in confirmation classes ask me (partly to be funny but also attempting to gain clarity), "Was Jesus a zombie?" According to Merriam-Webster, a zombie is "a will-less and speechless human held to have died and been supernaturally reanimated." The risen Jesus clearly had will and was able to speak which hopefully disqualifies him from being labeled as a zombie. However, the question demonstrates that many, if not all, struggle to make meaning from this very rare and supernatural occurrence that we call "the resurrection of Jesus."

Perhaps we gain a bit of clarity when we're able to think about the resurrection in terms of "the Christ" and not only through the limited lens of bringing a single dead person back to life. "The Christ" is the idea in the mind of God on day one of the Genesis creation narrative where God says, "Let there be light." That "light" was God's vision for the creation in which all things, humanity included, would dwell in intimate relationship with God and one another. However, humanity missed the mark in living fully into God's divine design from the beginning and as such corrupted the creation by introducing division, violence, abuse, and destruction. Humans have objectified God's creatures, the natural world, and even other human beings resulting in lasting devastation and the inability for many to be unleashed to rise to the level that God intends for each of us. As such, a "new creation" needed to be rebirthed. The arrival of the Christ in the person of Jesus IS the "rebirthing" of the new creation.

The killing of Jesus was humanity's utter and complete rejection of the Christ, of God's vision for the world. When we killed Jesus, we were ostensibly killing ourselves. We were saying to God, as young children sometimes do, "We wish we had never been born." However, the resurrection of Jesus, or better said, the resurrection of "the Christ" was God's act of committing to God's vision from the beginning and refusing to give up on the dream that all of life can coexist in a manner that is built on love, service, and generosity. The resurrection is not simply the resuscitation of a first-century Palestinian man, but the divine reclaiming of all things and the eternal promise that love and life win.

As "resurrected people," we are called to live out of God's vision for what human life, human culture is to be. It's through us that new life comes into our homes, work places, schools, and neighborhoods so that all can be unleashed to live as children of God. What we do matters! How we live matters! God is counting on us to trust that love is stronger than hate or fear, that life withstands the violence and destruction of the world. May this Easter serve as a birthday for you, the day of you being recreated, resurrected as God's child and sent out to share God's love in unique and profound ways so that all may experience real life.

Loving God, thank you for creating life and for giving me the opportunity to experience life. Help me to let go of the things that are keeping me from living fully and give me the courage to be the person, you precious child, that you created me to be through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Pastor Doug Hill





