

Lenten Devotions
2025

**HOPE
IN THE
WILDERNESS**

Beloved in Christ at Abiding Hope,

What is the wilderness? For some, it is a place of magic and beauty; for others, it is a place of suffering and loss. No matter how we define it, we have all found ourselves there. Yet, none of us journey through the wilderness alone. God meets each of us in life's most challenging moments to provide companionship, guidance, care and hope.

This Lent, we invite you to walk through the wilderness alongside members of the Abiding Hope community. Learn how they have found hope in the hardest of times. The following devotions will lead us from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday. They will take us from dust to resurrection, and from death to new life.

A heartfelt thank you to all who have shared their stories. We will hold them gently and use them as light in our own wilderness times.

With gratitude,
Pastor Julie

Pastor Julie McNitt
Lead Servant for Spiritual Life

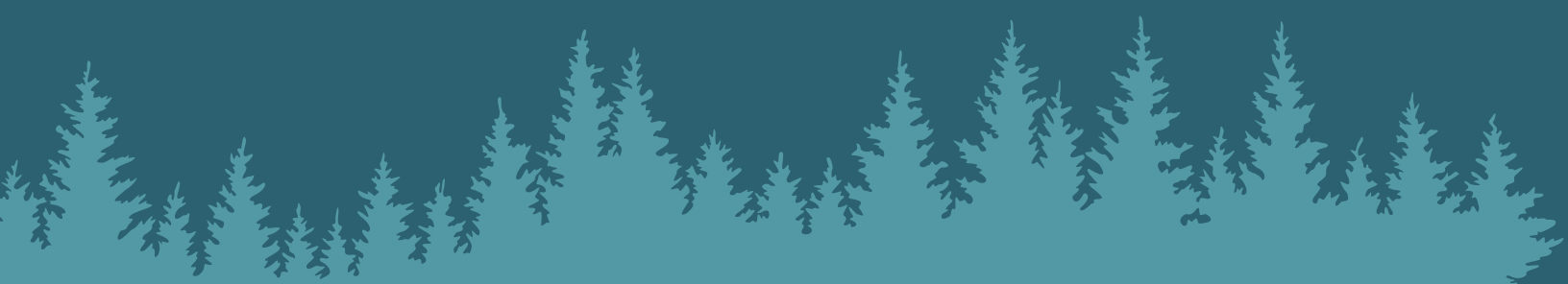


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Ash Wednesday, March 5

Dust

Abby Eno

As I sat in my 20 week ultrasound room pregnant with our third baby, the words of the doctor were drowned out by overwhelming grief. This can't be happening. I have been carrying this baby for 20 weeks, I can feel her moving, you can't possibly tell me she's not going to live. There must be something we can do. The words of specialists, "she is not a candidate for surgery, I'm so sorry." The grief consumed me. I was on my knees. I couldn't listen to music. I couldn't sleep. I drove around for hours in the middle of many nights ruminating over an impossible situation. I recall a multi-hour conversation with my mom as I drove around, watching the sun peak over the horizon. "I would do anything to take this pain away from you," she said. I knew I had to have that kind of unconditional motherly love for my own baby – to take away her suffering even if I knew I might suffer more.

We lost Olivia Grace on Ash Wednesday. I could barely walk but I knew I had to be at church that night. "You are dust and to dust you shall return." Tears streamed down my face. We wanted her so badly, how could God let this happen? Where was God in this? Where was my miracle? I searched. I read books. I inquired about the story of Job. Listened to poetry. I asked every wise person I knew. I could feel God right there with me, and yet I was angry. Devastated. I felt betrayed. Broken. In the early days, it hurt so badly I believed that by taking another breath, I might just implode and burst into a million pieces – a dust of sorts.

By the advice of Pastor Doug, my husband and I were softer with one another. We were told to sit close, and physically touch each other. We needed each other. We took that advice like medicine. Our friends and family fed us, helped us meet our basic needs, walked and listened while we grieved for countless hours. During the darkest days, Abiding Hope was my safe place. Our kids were loved by the teenagers in the nursery and the people in the pews. They felt at home there. I felt at home there. I came to church for every single event I could – searching. Grieving. On my knees.

At some point, I started to see light. People in the church community, some we didn't even know, hugged us, cried with us, made us gifts. A prayer shawl. A rock with Olivia's name on it. We felt so loved and seen. And each day that passed, each breath that I took that I didn't turn to dust, I healed just a little. I don't believe that the wilderness makes you stronger, it reveals the strength you already had inside. A strength you likely didn't know you had. Susie Gamelin said in a Pastor Chat, "our job is not to understand life, but to experience it." I certainly could not understand this but I could focus on feeling and living it. That was do able. My faith in heaven grew solid. I know that our little butterfly baby is up there being held by our grandparents and Jesus.



Ash Wednesday, March 5

I learned that God is not a puppeteer in the sky, creating tragedies on earth. I didn't get my miracle for Olivia, we did not avert a tragedy despite all the praying and crying out. But God did show up in the people around us. And in a way, that was my prayer being answered.

Rabbi Harold Kushner writes in his book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, "The conventional explanation that God sends us the burden because He knows that we are strong enough to handle it, has it all wrong. Fate, not God, sends us the problem. When we try to deal with it, we find that we are not strong. We are weak, we get tired, we get angry, we get overwhelmed. We begin to wonder how we will ever make it through all the years. But when we reach the limits of our own strength and courage, something unexpected happens. We find reinforcement coming from a source outside ourselves. And in the knowledge that we are not alone, that God is on our side, we manage to go on."



Thursday, March 6

Hope in the Wilderness of Retirement

Lisa Selzer

Without much fanfare, I recently retired. Like all of life's thresholds, it comes with a certain amount of fear and trepidation. Have I saved enough to avoid being a burden to my family as I age? Will I be able to maintain the lifestyle to which I have become accustomed? How will I fill my days? What if my spouse gets tired of having me around all the time? Or worse—what if I get tired of having him around?

Despite all the books on how to navigate retirement successfully and the well-meaning advice from friends, entering this phase of life feels a lot like wandering alone into a wilderness.

By far, the biggest adjustment has been redefining who I am—an identity crisis of sorts. My parents are both deceased, so I am no longer cared for by them, nor am I a caregiver to them. My children are now adults, living fulfilling lives hundreds of miles away, with no need for a doting mother. Since most of the people I now associate with have never even met them, my role as "mother" feels more like a title than an active identity.

I worked outside the home for most of my adult life, taking time off here and there to fulfill parental roles or deal with medical issues. My job titles have ranged from corporate librarian, med tech, phlebotomist, and division chair to training coordinator and, my personal favorite, Vice President of Efficacy. Not having the responsibilities of clients, patients, or bosses anymore is freeing... sort of. The structure those roles provided gave me a certain sense of comfort.

Also without much fanfare, I recently stepped away from my cherished roles with the youth at Abiding Hope. Since 2000, I have served in various capacities—as a confirmation guide, CIA leader, and All In guide. I still love and support these amazing kids and treasure my relationships with them, but I finally realized it was time to leave the heavy lifting of faith formation and relationship-building to others. I must confess, I feel a bit of FOMO when I'm not singing and dancing with them at All In or spending weekends with them on retreats.

I think of Jesus' time in the wilderness after his baptism as an identity crisis of sorts—time set apart to reflect on who he was and what his evolving role in the world should be. Even he had the devil's "assistance" to help him discern what he should and should not do with his role as the Christ.

Relationships, titles, and roles inevitably change over time. I turn to the faith formation lessons I once instilled in the youth I guided. Like Jesus in the wilderness, I find hope in knowing that my identity was, is, and will always be Child of God. Rooted in that truth, I trust that my next journey will lead me out of this wilderness. And wherever I land, I will continue to be the heart, hands, and feet of Jesus.

Finding Hope in Myself

Jeremy Hill

Feeling lost and in the “wilderness” is not something I’m used to experiencing. When I chose to go out of state for college in 2019, I was excited. I had huge expectations and planned for a smooth transition. That was not the case.

Once I was dropped off, I realized I was alone. That feeling sat in my stomach like I had just eaten a huge meal. Over time, it grew into overwhelming anxiety and depression, affecting my everyday life. I slowly watched my grades drop and stopped being my normal outgoing self. I was lost in the “wilderness.”

After my first semester, I had a conversation with my family about transferring schools. They quickly persuaded me to stay and give it another chance. When I returned, I started to feel more hopeful each day, believing that God had me on the path I was meant to follow. But that hope was quickly taken away when COVID-19 shut down our college campus, and we were sent home. All the progress I thought I had made was erased, and I had to start over.

During my time at home, I grew closer to a friend from Colorado. We spent late nights on FaceTime and talked constantly. Eventually, I asked her to be my girlfriend. Grace was the light I had been searching for in my darkest moments. The only problem was that she attended CU Boulder in Colorado, while I was in Columbus, Ohio. Despite the distance, Grace was committed to making it work and was always there when I needed someone to talk to.

Once I returned to school, I started to feel like myself again. I made friends with just about everyone on campus and eventually became the president of my fraternity, which made my college experience even better. Finding hope within myself wasn’t easy, but by surrounding myself with love and people who believed in me, I was able to escape the “wilderness.” I went from wanting to leave my school to cherishing every moment there and staying every chance I could.

Today, I live a life full of hope, believing that God has a path for me. I continue moving forward, creating new opportunities for myself. Every day is a chance to learn, grow, and become stronger than the day before.

Saturday, March 8

Choosing to Accept

Karen Brisch

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. Proverbs 3:5-6

God has been working in my life in ways I never imagined possible. Six months ago, I chose sobriety as a permanent solution in my life. I started my sobriety the very day my daughter found out she was pregnant—though I didn't know it at the time. I just knew I had to be sober in order to be a better person.

A key to my sobriety has been choosing to accept guidance in my life. I was destroying my relationships, causing hurt and pain to those around me. But on August 4, 2024, I made the decision to embrace sobriety as a lifelong commitment and to work toward becoming the best version of myself.

My addiction had led me astray. I was lost in the wilderness, but now I am finding my way back. I am leaning into my emotions, even when it's difficult, knowing that I have God's grace and guidance. Losing relationships and nearly ruining my life finally opened my eyes to where God has been leading me all along. Divine guidance is my hope.

Through the Grace of God, I am now becoming the best version of myself, walking the path I believe God intended for me. I am looking forward to my future and to being a grandmother soon!

For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Jeremiah 29:11

Monday, March 10

Both/And

Christine Angelini

These two little words have become a mantra of sorts over the last four years. They have sustained me and helped me accept life as it becomes increasingly complicated—filled with more challenges, more losses, and more grief. Now, more than ever, leaning on friends is crucial. Forming that web of interdependence is my hope in the wilderness.

Francis Weller wrote, “The work of the mature person is to carry grief in one hand and gratitude in the other and to be stretched large by them. How much sorrow can I hold? That's how much gratitude I can give. If I carry only grief, I'll bend toward cynicism and despair. If I have only gratitude, I'll become saccharine and won't develop much compassion for other people's suffering. Grief keeps the heart fluid and soft, which helps make compassion possible.”

My friend Misti shared this quote along with her Both/And perspective on life, and both have become important to me. Life is rarely an either/or experience, particularly as we age. There is both/and in everything. Even in times of hopelessness, we can find joy and laughter while also making room for and acknowledging the sorrow that is an inevitable part of being human.

Recently, my sister died. She had been in poor health for some time, but in August, suddenly she was gone. Her son, my nephew, was married in October. This seemed so incredibly unfair—to him and to us. She was the third death in our family in 16 months. We lost my mother in April, my father-in-law in December, and then my sister in August. We were all reeling.

But we also held onto the joy and hope of my nephew's wedding in October. That event became a life raft for us. When he asked me to stand in for my sister during the mother-son dance, I was honored.

We cried on that dance floor for so many things. I wiped his tears as he held on to me and wept. We were saying goodbye to her and also hello to his new life. We were being stretched large by our capacity to hold the both/and of life in that moment, dancing to *Come Away With Me* by Norah Jones.

Was it fair? No.

Did either of us envision this? No.

Was this how it was supposed to be? No.

Monday, March 10



But we found solace in our shared experience. We missed her intensely, even as we celebrated his love and new partnership in life.

A friend recently said, “Surely 2025 will be better. It has to be”. But realistically, we are aging, which means more losses, more heartbreaks, more health issues, and more grief. But we are not alone. We get through it together—by sharing our stories of grief and hope.

Tuesday, March 11

Unseen Hope

Carole Hanson-Chase

This devotion was written by Pastor Julie, following a conversation with Carol Hanson-Chase.

Carol Hanson had always been an active and independent person. Most days, you could find her on the golf course, either working or playing. Like many people, she enjoyed the ordinary pleasures of everyday life; driving a car, watching television, reading, shopping, and more, but that would all change.

Two years ago, Carol stepped into a wilderness of darkness she could never have imagined. It began on the golf course when she noticed that she wasn't seeing very well. Initially, she attributed her vision problems to a migraine, but the problem would not clear. After visiting the eye doctor, Carol learned some terrible news. The nerves connecting her eye to her brain had died and she would lose vision completely in one eye.

Carol adjusted to her new reality and continued to live life as normal. She could still drive, work, and most importantly golf!

On April 30, 2023, Carol's life would change forever. When she woke up that morning, she could not see at all. It was frightening, to say the least. Carol went immediately to her eye doctor and learned that the worst had happened. Even though the odds were extremely rare, Carol had lost vision in her other eye as well. She was now completely blind.

Initially, Carol's blindness was devastating but with the support of her husband, Troy, she is rebuilding her life around this new reality. She has the love and support of many friends and family members.

Carol found hope through the Colorado School for the Blind. Their programs and support groups gave Carol and Troy the tools they needed to begin adjusting to their new reality and Carol met others who were in the same wilderness.

In the last year Carol has joined a blind bowling league and taken golf lessons specifically for the blind. She is happy to say that she can now hit a golf ball again! She also enjoys worshiping regularly at Abiding Hope (something she missed while she was working at the golf course every Sunday).

Carol's wilderness story is both heartbreaking and inspiring. She may have lost her vision, but she has not lost her faith. Even though she lives with more fear than ever before, she finds hope in prayer, the companionship of others, and her faith. She also hopes that one day there will be a cure for her blindness. In the meantime, she continues to trust that love and life win. Her parting message is simple, "Never give up!"

Thank you, Carol, for sharing your story with us.

Wednesday, March 12

Care in Community

Savannah Zimmerman

2024 was the hardest year I have experienced in my life to date.

I want nothing more than to become a mother. In July I was diagnosed with PCOS, an incurable condition that can deeply affect fertility. This was a heart-wrenching diagnosis to receive, but my amazing doctors worked alongside me to come up with a plan to help me and my husband conceive. We began our fertility journey with high spirits that we would be pregnant before the end of the year!

Then in November, I miscarried. Although it was merely days into my pregnancy, the loss was devastating. Not only did it mean losing the pregnancy, but it also meant that the next round of fertility treatments would not be able to happen until the new year. Coupled with concerns about the incoming administration's impact on fertility treatments—I felt truly hopeless by Thanksgiving. Gratitude was far out of reach for me, and it was the lowest point in my entire life. I was surrounded by family, and yet I felt completely isolated in my grief.

Through that suffering, I experienced God pushing me toward community. Friends of friends, whom I had barely met, reached out to me to share their journeys with infertility. I found out that one of my aunts underwent a similar fertility treatment like the one I am hoping to try in the new year, which resulted in two beautiful, healthy twin girls for her. A colleague shared her experience with fertility treatments and how it brought her three beautiful boys. I found that so many people I know and love have been affected by infertility and have come through it.

I've leaned into relationships with my loving husband, my sisters, my mother-in-law, my small group at Abiding Hope, and lifelong friends. I found the more I've allowed my community to care for me, the less alone and more hopeful I've felt.

Hope doesn't erase pain and heartache. I still grieve the life I thought I would be living. But having hope does make the journey a little more bearable. We are still navigating our story with infertility, and God willing, it will be over soon. Until that day comes, I will continue holding onto the hope that someday we will hold our baby in our arms, and until we do, we have an amazing community holding us in theirs.

A Lenten Devotional Prayer

Jeanmarie Orellana

Oh, God, increase my faith in you. Gracious God, help me grow in love and steadfast trust that you know everything that I need and listen when I call out and pray to you. Blessed Jesus, you have always answered my prayers and turned my sorrows into joy. Help me turn everything over to you. So often I have made short-sighted decisions or reacted unlovingly to others, even those I love. Forgive me for missing the mark, O Lord. Help me to be your heart, hands, and feet in this world.

I am open and set on learning new ways-- your way of loving and accepting your will for me. Everyone around me and far from me are your beloved children. We are all at different points on our life's journey of finding and returning to your way-- your path.

I will breathe you in deeply and slowly exhale all doubt or uncertainty.

I will listen for your small still voice and follow your holy word. I seek your encouragement and come to your table to be fed. I will recognize those guides you have placed on my path, and together we will grow in peace, love, and abiding hope knowing that you walk alongside us.

God's Plan

Leah Naess

"Your job has been eliminated. Clean out your desk," my manager said as he handed me a check. "This is your last check and it includes two weeks of severance pay."

I was aghast. I was counting on that job and, at the time, felt like I had the best of both worlds. I had moved into the state to establish residency, had worked into what felt like a secure situation, and was attending graduate school. No one had seen layoffs coming.

"You've done a good job here," my manager said, "and I am happy to give you a good reference. You won't have any trouble getting a new job."

Kaboom! My life changed in that instant. It was spring and I was in graduate school, taking three classes in addition to working the full-time job. Finding a new position, getting up to speed, maintaining my studies, which I loved, and finishing my school semester without letting my grades go down the tubes would be impossible! Where to start? What is important?

Rules about collecting unemployment were very specific about not being able to collect while going to school and being required to actively look for work, which I didn't feel like I could do while finishing my school semester. Each class required that I write a 30-page paper and there would be finals. I didn't feel like I could live a lie.

Rent was due and bills needed to be paid, and my severance pay wouldn't last more than a month. That was not long enough.

As a 15-year-old girl, I had helped an elderly couple in our church who owned a bakery and coffee shop and needed a waitress. It was a lot harder work than being a babysitter, and I wasn't very good at it, but I learned a lot through the years, and did it as a part-time job as a college student. As the situation became more urgent, I remembered my restaurant work. You go home with money in your pocket the first night. I was blessed to find a job in a steak house on the nights I wasn't in school.

The first night, an angel wearing cook's clothing pulled me aside and handed me a piece of prime rib wrapped in tin foil that someone had sent back to the kitchen because it wasn't cooked to their liking. "Take this home," he said. "I'm going to have to throw it away anyway."

That night after work I had a good dinner for the first time in many weeks, the tips in my pocket added up, and I was able to pay rent, and after school was finished, I got a new job. I am forever in that cook's debt as he showed me kindness and gave me a lifeline of hope when life was pretty bleak...and from then on, I love eating prime rib!

Saturday, March 15

Hope Shows Up

Kristin Heath

When my dad passed away last year, I experienced all the stages of grief I would have expected with the loss of a parent. What I didn't expect was the grief I would also feel for my mom, and how life-altering this death would be for her. After 57 years of marriage, she now lives alone in a very rural area. It's more than a three hour drive to visit family. Her nearest neighbor is about a mile down the road. She has several health issues that require frequent medical appointments, some as far as 80 miles away. Along with all life's challenges, she is experiencing her own grief while trying to figure out what life will look like moving forward.

Early on, I worried about how she would manage in a big house alone, how she would get her medical needs met, and how she would adjust to this new life. While I still worry, I also have hope. This hope came a little at a time from the people in her community who have supported her when her family can't always be there. It came from the neighbor who stayed with her for two days after my dad died, when my brothers and I couldn't get there right away because of a snowstorm. The same neighbor organized daily meal deliveries over the next few weeks from others in the area. Hope came from the paramedics who arranged a CPR class for rural residents in memory of my dad and invited my mom as the guest of honor. Hope comes from the friends who accompany her to medical appointments, even the appointments that are 80 miles away. Hope comes from the friends who check on her frequently, invite her to Taco Tuesday, shovel her snow, and bake her favorite pie to show her she is loved. Hope comes from my brother, who, semi-retired, is able to visit frequently to take care of home maintenance and financial responsibilities.

My mom isn't out of the wilderness yet. There are still decisions to be made and ongoing support she needs. Little by little she is healing. I am grateful for the caring people surrounding her and lifting her up during this time. They have given me hope that she will find comfort and a new path forward.



Monday, March 17

The Power of Prayer

Ralph Morgenweck

My grandson, Decker Otto Paulson, was born on April 17, 2023, in Anacortes, Washington, weighing a healthy 7 pounds, 8 ounces. Early on, Decker faced challenges: he was diagnosed with a tongue and lip tie, which was addressed at 4 days old. During this procedure, a nurse thought she heard a heart murmur. Although his pediatrician didn't hear it, the concern lingered.

When Decker developed respiratory distress from a cold, he was taken to the Anacortes ER twice. On the second visit, the doctor decided to bring in Children's Hospital for further evaluation. Decker's breathing was labored, and he required oxygen. He was transferred to Valley Hospital in Renton, WA, for NICU care. An x-ray showed a boot-shaped heart, an indicator of aortic coarctation, a narrowing of the aorta, the major artery that carries oxygen-rich blood to the body. This rare condition, found in 4 out of 10,000 babies, was confirmed along with pneumonia.

Decker's diagnosis stunned us. While his parents arranged for an electrocardiogram, he caught another cold, which worsened his breathing. His pediatrician recommended he go to Seattle Children's ER, where he would be admitted and possibly seen by a cardiologist. Decker's mom, Abby, drove him to Seattle, and they stayed for two nights. An echocardiogram revealed that Decker's aortic coarctation was worsening, and surgery would be required urgently.

The surgery, which would involve removing the constricted portion of the aorta and reconnecting the healthy ends, was scheduled for June 21. However, a week before the procedure, Decker caught another rhinovirus, delaying the surgery until July 17—three months after he was born.

During those months, we anxiously counted down the days. My prayers for Decker grew more intense, asking God for a successful surgery and recovery. One day, as I prayed, a deep sense of peace and warmth enveloped me. I wondered if God was telling me not to worry, that Decker would be okay. Could I believe that God was reassuring me?

Finally, the day of the surgery arrived. Once again, I prayed with all my heart. That same feeling of peace and warmth returned. This time, my weak faith believed that God was holding Decker in God's arms. The surgery was a success. Decker's heart, once broken, was now healthy. He came through the procedure with no lingering effects and is now a normal, thriving boy.

This experience has profoundly impacted my faith. It reminded me of God's loving presence, always ready to hear our cries and offer peace in our most anxious moments. Through Decker's journey, I witnessed the power of prayer, the reassurance of divine peace, and the joy of seeing a miracle unfold. Decker's healing is a testament to a loving God who watches over us, even in our darkest times.

Tuesday, March 18

On the Other Side of Fear

DeNae vanWestrienen

"They" say the Lord works in mysterious ways. And sometimes the Lord even works through church! I've certainly experienced some mysterious ways during my almost 48 years on the planet and the inevitable wilderness times that come with the human experience. Some are seemingly small gestures like my grandma sending me a list of reasons she loves me because someone hurt my feelings. Some are grand gestures like friends making a schedule to watch our foster kids every Tuesday so I could volunteer at two of our biological kids' weekly theater rehearsals. I felt God's love and sustenance in each instance.

I find myself sometimes trudging, sometimes power hiking through the wilderness yet again. A pending divorce after 27 years of marriage, a new medical diagnosis for a child, 2/4 of my kids off to college, trying to support myself while continuing to homeschool our two non-college-aged kids, and the worries that come with all of that have thrown me for a loop. The trifecta of therapy, antidepressants, and physical movement have kept me afloat. Even so, some days are a struggle. I know many can relate, even if their struggles aren't exactly my struggles.

My kids and I started attending Abiding Hope in November of 2023, adding switching churches to our long list of major life transitions. God's timing has proven perfect since we first visited Abiding Hope. Never has this been more evident than when God used bible verses shared during the Advent season to show me a path through my wilderness.

We are probably familiar with the many times the Bible says something like, "Do not be afraid." Conversely, what stood out to me about some of the Advent readings were the verses that talked about people's fears. "Mary was greatly troubled at these words." Luke 1:29. "When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified." Matthew 17:6. "they (the shepherds) were terrified." Luke 2:9. Sometimes people in the Bible were afraid, even though the angels and Jesus told them they didn't need to be. And the very things they feared turned out to be miracles and answers to prayer. If they'd kept their eyes shut and turned their backs on that which they feared, they wouldn't have experienced visiting the newborn Messiah in a manger or seeing Jesus after his resurrection.

These verses continue to remind me to be on the lookout for beauty and possibility on the other side of my fear. To remember that the unknown isn't automatically awful. My path wasn't cleared, and my actual problems weren't solved. The wilderness isn't gone, conquered, in the rear-view mirror. Instead, the path was illuminated. The boulders were pushed to the side. The roots were painted orange to make it easier to walk without tripping. God reminded me I don't have to be afraid, but if I am, amazing things can be on the other side of that fear. So, I approach with hope, wonder, and appreciation for the many ways God shows up in my life.

God in the Pain

Bridget Kuykendall

I have had daily headaches for nearly 35 years. In November, I was referred to a headache specialist at the Mayo Clinic. I will also see a neuromuscular specialist and a neurovascular specialist there in the months ahead.

Some of you may know that I had my fifth brain surgery last January. A few days after the surgery, I experienced a “pain flare.” My surgeon said I was “having an inflammatory reaction to the stress of the surgery.” Then, from the corner of his eye, he added, “And we all know your body likes to make inflammation.” He isn’t wrong. He prescribed steroids and anti-inflammatory medication.

What we didn’t know was that I would have thirteen more of these flares last year.

I’ll try to quickly describe a “pain flare.” First, the pain is in the front of my head, crossing to both temples. I don’t rate anything as a 10/10 on the pain scale unless I’m struggling to remain conscious. (You can look up the “Mankoski Pain Scale”—I believe it accurately describes pain levels for each number) These flares, I rate as a 9/10. For the first time in my life, because of these flares, I finally understand true suffering. The only thing that stops them is steroids, so needless to say, I have been on steroids far too much.

When these flares happen, the only thing I can do is get quiet and still. I can’t focus on much because the pain is too overwhelming. I have been through hell and back with everything my body has thrown at me. Even after all I’ve endured, I can honestly say these flares have traumatized me.

Yet, when the pain is at its worst and I am forced to be still, I truly believe that’s when I feel God with me. It’s then that I feel closest to God. It might sound ridiculous, but in those moments, I draw nearer to God. It’s then that I pray for the strength to endure, for God’s consolation and love. It’s then that I feel God’s comfort. It is at those times I know that I know God is there. I don’t know why I’ve always been wired this way, but I am grateful for it—beyond words.

Thursday, March 20

Hope in Death

Barb McNitt

Hope is a very complicated word. It can have a different meaning for a follower of Christ than for a non-believer. "I hope it rains today." "I hope I get a promotion at work." "I hope the Nuggets win another championship." These are all very valid things to hope for in the secular world we live in. But there are spiritual hopes that have a deeper, more profound meaning.

On June 10, 2022, I discovered that deeper meaning. My strong, healthy, loving husband of 50 years was diagnosed with glioblastoma, which is a very aggressive incurable brain cancer. The average life span with glioblastoma is 6 to 18 months. Needless to say, as weeks and months passed we realized that there was no hope for recovery. It was time to trust in God's promise that death did not have the last word, that God would never forsake us, and that we would never be alone. Instead, I hoped for a good death for John, that he would not suffer, and that he would experience as much joy as possible in the time he had left.

The way I look at hope now is far more complicated than it was before John's diagnosis. By trusting in God and receiving hope from the Gospel, I became stronger than I ever thought I could in this situation. His death was peaceful and, as weird as it may sound, perfect. God's presence was everywhere and even now, 1 year and 2 months after John's journey home, I never stop hoping for the strength to go on and to achieve God's purpose for me through this pain of loss and heartache.

For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you HOPE and a future. Jeremiah 29:11

Friday, March 21

Keeping it Simple

Bob Worley

Simplicity can be a beautiful thing. Shakespeare wrote, “Brevity is the soul of wit...” Throughout history, great minds like Shakespeare, Leonardo da Vinci, and Albert Einstein have extolled the virtue of simplicity.

In the 1960s, the acronym “KISS” (“Keep It Simple, Stupid”) was coined by Lockheed lead design engineer Kelly Johnson to emphasize the importance of simplicity in aircraft design.

In that spirit, here is a list of some simple things:

- Viewing a sunrise
- A sunset (highly recommended)
- A kiss on the forehead of a child
- The night’s magnificent, glorious firmament
- Chocolate
- Petting your dog (or, less enthusiastically, your cat)
- Skipping (remember how it felt?)
- Laughter
- Music
- Someone saying, “Good morning” to you
- Children playing

The list could go on.

I have been in the wilderness more than a few times in my life. For me, taking a moment to appreciate and savor the simple things can bring joy and perspective to this complicated world. It can lead me out of the wilderness and give me hope—hope for the future, hope that this world is not only full of war, hatred, and bigotry but also peace, love, and forgiveness. Hope for mercy and justice to abide on this planet. Hope that love and life will win.

I wish you peace and joy this Lenten season. Keep it simple.

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you. Philippians 4:8-9

Saturday, March 22

Our Hope and Devotion to Our Son Mark

Jim and Joan Glassman

Mark was a beacon of light through the challenges he faced—both his health setbacks and personal triumphs—throughout most of his life.

Just before his second birthday, Mark became ill with an ear infection and looked very pale. Our pediatrician sent us to Children's Hospital in Denver. After running tests, he was diagnosed with Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia (ALL). He was immediately admitted, and chemotherapy began right away. Following his discharge, rounds of chemotherapy continued for three months, involving needle pokes, spinal taps, and platelet monitoring as an outpatient. Countless times, Mark became sick from the treatment and frequently lost his appetite. These were very dark times.

Over time, Mark grew stronger, and after three years, he triumphed over leukemia. All our hopes and prayers were answered, and the leukemia remained in remission.

However, just a few short years later, he began suffering from epileptic seizures. They started out minor but gradually worsened, becoming uncontrolled as he aged until his passing at age 36 in 2017. During this long battle, Mark was seen by some of the best neurologists in Augusta, GA; at the Mayo Clinic in MN; and back home in Colorado. He took countless anticonvulsants, tried a ketogenic diet, and even had a Vagus Nerve Stimulator implant. Every new treatment gave us hope, and each one lessened the seizures for a short time—only for them to return.

Due to having multiple seizures, we spent many days in hospital emergency rooms—getting stitches, repairing broken shoulders from falls on stairs, and tending to injuries from bicycle crashes. Mark, however, never lost his sense of humor. He compared himself to Tim Allen's accident-prone character on the show *Home Improvement*, and the ER doctors knew him by name.



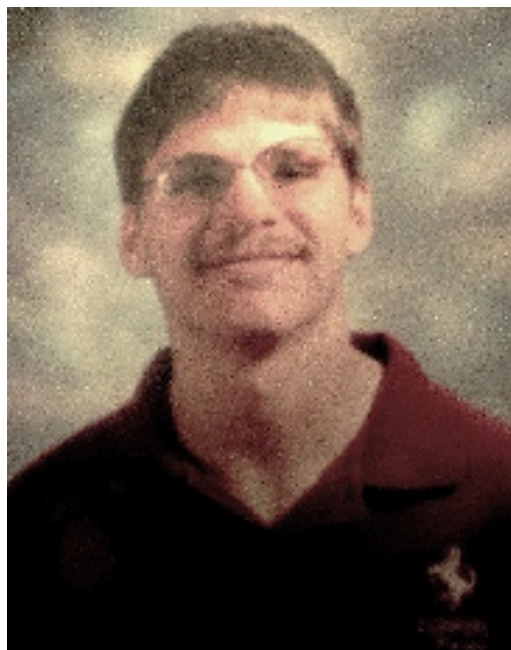
Saturday, March 22

What gave us hope was Mark's unwavering capacity to live life despite his challenges. He was a social and polite young man who rarely felt sorry for himself. He attended kindergarten and elementary school, later enrolling in a special school that helped him rejuvenate and build friendships despite his learning disabilities. His high school graduation was one of his proudest moments and led to a job at the Developmental Disabilities Resource Center, where he worked in a sheltered workshop.

When his job ended, he entered a day program that allowed him to interact with the community. He became known as "Mr. Ferrari" for his love of fast cars. As the years went on, however, his medical issues took a toll. Our hopes shifted—we knew he would be joining God soon, so we began making arrangements for the three of us. When Mark saw his name on our family headstone, he smiled and said, "I am so happy that I will be with you and Mom forever."

During his final trip to the hospital, Mark was placed on a ventilator. Despite medical intervention, his seizures continued. God gave us the strength to remove the ventilator, and Jim held Mark's hand as he passed away peacefully.

Not a single day has gone by without Mark in our hearts and minds. Before my own surgery, I had a dream where Mark came to me, gave me a hug, and said, "Dad, it's going to be alright." And he was right.



Monday, March 24

Hope for Haiti

Brian & Linda Rindels

Life in Haiti can certainly be described as living in the wilderness.

Brian visited Haiti for the first time in 2007 and developed a passion for the country and the people. He, and many others from Abiding Hope, became committed to helping in any way they could. Numerous trips to Haiti resulted in a love for the country and its people. While the country has always lived with a certain amount of upheaval, it was thrown into chaos with the assassination of President Jovenel Moise in July of 2021. His murder left a vacuum and gangs now control a big part of the country. Foreign aid has been reduced and essential services such as health care, public transportation, electricity, and clean water are non-existent or substantially reduced. For most families living in Haiti, hope can be very hard to find.

Abiding Hope's support for the Haitian Timoun Foundation (HTF) is a source of hope for many and is grounded in its relationship with Maya Fond-Rose, the in-country director for HTF. In early 2024 we began to see hope when Maya's wife, Rosemela (Lala), and son, Rick, were approved to enter the US under the Family Reunification Program. On April 19, 2024, Maya, Rosemela, and Rick arrived in Denver and came to our home. We had spent time preparing for their arrival and shortly after their arrival, they moved into their own home. They are living where Rick can walk a few blocks to the school bus stop, Lala can walk to the public library to take English lessons, and an RTD station is a few blocks away. There is also a Rec Center within walking distance where Rick has been able to take swimming lessons. Maya had to return to Haiti at the end of the summer and now we pray that Maya and their oldest son, Heiberton, will be able to join the family here one day.

We are proud of Lala and Rick and how well they are adjusting to a different life in America. We love them and want the best for them. We cannot help but worry for them considering the current climate in our country towards immigrants, but we trust and believe and find hope that love and life will win. We've witnessed a tremendous support structure from the many friends who have reached out and offered to help this sweet family. Many Abiding Hope members have supported them by providing a computer, transporting them to church and dinner, guiding them on shopping expeditions when necessary, and hosting them at their homes for dinner. Several families have supported Rick in his school band experience and attended school events with them. The English tutors who work with them every week have demonstrated tremendous patience and love for this family. In this outpouring of love, we see progress and we see hope.

(devotion continues with Lala's)

Rosemela (Lala) Fond-Rose

I had lived for years where I was born in my country. God gave me a beautiful family that I love very much. Since my childhood I had known a rich and prosperous Haiti. It would make you want to live there and not to go elsewhere. In Haiti respect reigned, along with love and peace, and tranquility. Indeed I left my country to come to the United States through an unexpected trip thanks to the Haitian Timoun Foundation team. After a long journey I arrived in America. I found a warm welcome from my friends.

With the hope of living in America I place confidence in myself by learning a foreign language and the culture of this country. I believe the opportunities will come to enrich my knowledge and learn better, to gain employment and earn my own money to pay my bills and provide for my son and myself. I arrived by the grace of the Lord and remain hopeful for a better life. With God I will seize the opportunities for good health and work.



Sharing Hope

Sheryl Hellmuth

Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for the God who promised is faithful. Hebrews 10:23

Hope feels like a cord that I sometimes cling to with gritty determination while the world and life's circumstances swirl around me, trying to distract and disorient my faith. Hope is not some mushy Hallmark sentiment—like holding a string with a balloon that drifts lightly in the wind, bouncing around aimlessly, vulnerable to whatever impacts it, afraid that if you lose your grip, it will float away, never to be seen again.

Hope is more like the strong rope that secures you while rock climbing—as gravity pulls at you, and you lose your hold, it catches you, keeping you from crashing, because God has promised never to let you go.

Sometimes, it feels as though hope isn't taken seriously enough. But hope is a strong tether to God's promises—for our daily walk and our future. Hope is what Jesus declared from the cross when he told the thief beside him that they would be in paradise together. Hope is what Jesus shared with the marginalized people he encountered as he walked this earth. Hope is the promise God makes that we are God's children and there is nothing that can change what God has promised.

Hope is what we are called to share.

These lessons and promises have helped me hang onto hope in scary times. I remember walking into an ICU unit to see my dad for the first time after he had suffered blood clots that almost took his life weeks after heart surgery. He had come through the surgery well and had been recovering nicely. My brother called with the shocking news when I was traveling with our youngest daughter, chasing her dream of being accepted into an arts school in Europe. I had been praying hard while navigating hope and fear during that week before I could arrive bedside to see my dad in person. They were calling him the miracle man.

Hospitals are such a mix of emotions and circumstances. Birth, healing, pain, and death mingle from floor to floor while angels staff the wards, monitors whirl and beep, and zombielike family members shuffle around the ICU. I arrived alone after visiting hours while a kind and thoughtful ICU nurse gently explained Dad's precarious condition and the many machines that were keeping him alive. I had been warned by my family about his appearance and swelling but it was so good to see him, speak to him, hold his hand, encourage him, and tell him I love him. During my anguished bedside prayers, the paradox came to me that I had to let go of my control balloon for the situation and hold onto the strongly tied tether of hope in God's promises. Let go, to hold on. God's got this in whatever way it works out. Peace. God's promises cover it all.

Wednesday, March 26

Lost in Motherhood

Alena Troxel

I moved to Littleton and three days later I had our second child, in October 2022. I had a brace on my leg and COVID-19 and was missing city life halfway across the country. I felt trapped and misunderstood parenting a newborn and toddler. Any new person I met saw me solely as a mother, as if I didn't have other aspects to my identity or that those aspects didn't matter anymore. In reality, I also forgot about any other aspect of my identity outside of motherhood. I got lost in the tedium and volume of motherhood-related tasks. I felt lost and suffocated, both overwhelmed and bored.

I wanted to remember who I was before I had kids and what brought me joy. The first thing I did was quit my dream job. I thought this powerful, high-status job would bring me joy but it only brought me stress and overwhelm. I spent months creating a business plan for a small business but God kept closing those doors. I pursued other career opportunities and continued to face closed doors and a strong message to focus on myself first. This message made me uncomfortable, it ran counter to so many messages I've received about a mother being self-sacrificing and selfless. I felt alone in feeling lost and lonely in motherhood so I persisted with my blinders on, despite clear signs that my mental health was suffering, until an event so significantly affected my mental health that I could focus on nothing else but my own well-being.

The moment I started letting go of what I 'should be doing' and started focusing on myself as God instructed me, the wilderness started to clear away. I started to better understand myself and how my past impacted me and my relationships with others. I gave myself the space to breathe and think. I started to remember little things I enjoyed and I would write them down. I started to notice a theme: living in community with others. But I felt so alone in this new place with two young kids, I didn't know where to start. At one point, I went out on a limb and mentioned these thoughts to someone, she told me, "Community happens when someone takes the initiative." I will never forget those words and started getting to work creating the life I truly wanted.

Wednesday, March 26

I had to overcome feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. I started small. I responded to a neighborhood Facebook group of moms of young kids and started to organize playdates and have some meaningful conversations. I then put an ad in our neighborhood newsletter for a book club at my house. I'd never run a book club or attended one but I love books. When our church small group was looking for additional leadership, I asked if I could help. And to come full circle, I recently became trained as a postpartum support group facilitator. This support group includes women from all across the country, from different backgrounds, ages, and experiences but they all talk about the same thing: they feel lost in the wilderness and they're looking for a community and someone to remind them that they are still in there. I hope I can be God's light in another person's wilderness, reminding them that they are an important, worthy child of God.



Thursday, March 27

An Angel Sent by God

Bob Steger

After finishing high school, I didn't know what to do next. I started classes at the local community college with an "undeclared" major. Then I took a semester off to travel the U.S. with a friend. In between, I worked to try to keep myself financially afloat.

After being out of high school for two years, I felt like I needed to make a decision about my career. After all, most of my old high school acquaintances seemed to have their acts together (or so I thought at the time). I decided to enroll at Madison Area Technical College in Madison, WI to become a land surveyor. MATC was about 60 miles from where my parents were living and from where I grew up. MATC was not only a new school for me, but it was also my first experience living away from home, and my first experience with a roommate.

For some reason, this first roommate of mine never seemed to like me, and to this day I do not know why. We rarely spoke to each other despite sharing the same apartment for 9 months. Things always felt tense when we were in the apartment together.

In addition to a difficult roommate situation, I was very disappointed in my classes at MATC, I was very unsure of the career path I was on, and I was not making any friends. Furthermore, I was losing touch with my old high school friends. I spent many weekends alone. I felt lost, discouraged, and very, very lonely.

During this time, a guy I knew from high school named Gordon was attending the University of Wisconsin, also located in Madison. We knew each other and were friendly to each other during high school, but we did not hang out together, so he was not really a "friend." I don't recall exactly how it happened or who contacted who, but somehow, we reconnected, and Gordon invited me to attend a college event with him. We both had a good time, and I was very relieved to not be home alone again on a Friday night watching TV. We continued hanging out together, and I recall a time we were talking about religion and Gordon said simply "The message of the Bible is love." That simple statement still resonates with me.

Gordon's friendship came at a time when I really needed a friend. As I reflect on it now, I believe that God sent Gordon to me. I suspect that Gordon had no idea how important his actions were to my emotional well-being. I was feeling lost in the wilderness, and God sent an angel to lead me out of my darkness.

Friday, March 28

Through the Wilderness

Doug Phelps

It fascinates me that the dictionary defines “wilderness” with words like uncultivated, inhospitable, and badlands. We often think of the wilderness as a place of isolation, disorientation, or difficult challenges that pull us out of our comfort zones. Yet, I often see images associated with the term that communicate something entirely different to me—natural, pristine, unhindered, magical. Doesn’t this feel incongruent?

In Western civilization and the Christian tradition, we tend to view the wilderness in a negative light—stripped of guidance, lost, and perplexed. At times in my life, especially last year, this absolutely described me as I faced frightening health issues and watched our son struggle in his own inhospitable wilderness. It felt as if we had been thrust into some badlands to suffer. Again.

The biblical accounts of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness for 40 years, Jesus enduring 40 days in the desert, and other similar stories have often been interpreted over time as purely negative experiences. Throughout human history, suffering in the wilderness has been perceived as bad, punitive, and, in many ways, a loss.

Yet, beacons of light, wisdom, and love have always entered my journey—people within the Abiding Hope community and beyond it, including authors like Brené Brown, Marianne Williamson, and Richard Rohr. I have found great comfort in the Prayer of Good Courage, which Pastor Jay always ends his sermons with. Through it all, I have come to see that there is both safety and necessary conflict in the wilderness, for it is where growth happens.

Through my walk in the wilderness, I have changed the way I process my life. I cry out for faith. I look to Psalm 46:10—“Be still and know that I am God.” I embrace the truth that growth and healing emerge through loss and renewal. The future unfolds, but the journey forward requires some form of dying to old ways. Richard Rohr calls this process “crucifixion to resurrection.” To reach somewhere good—somewhere better—we must go through the difficult, not around it. We cannot hold ourselves above it or apart from it.

God never turns God’s face from me. God’s Spirit resides within me, guiding my thoughts toward peace. I am never truly abandoned and never lost. I am held in the arms of God. Believing in a separation between myself and God leads to a negative experience of wilderness. No matter where I go today, I need not fear. With God, the wilderness is natural, pristine, unhindered, magical.

My steps—and yours—are in a wilderness that is beautiful and magical.

Saturday, March 29

Open Heart

Brynn Holzapfel

It was the summer of 2022. We had left our family, friends, jobs, house, and belongings in New Hampshire, packed our car, and traveled to Nova Scotia after a heartbreaking fallout with our local church, where Doug served as a worship pastor. We traveled with Doug's father who had a small house on the water, and who was working through serious mental health issues. We made the best of our time: we picked and sold blueberries on the side of the road, ate fish and lobster caught by the neighbors, made beach fires almost nightly, played music in the shed with the kids, and ran barefoot on the chilly beaches. It was a magical, yet dark time.

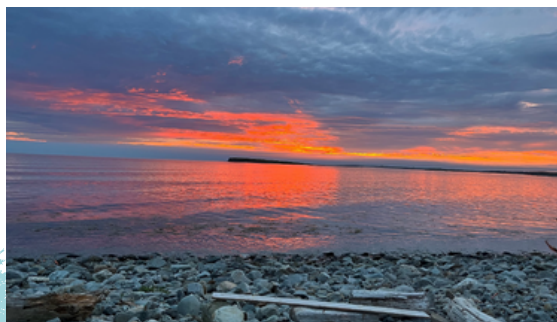
One foggy Friday morning, the unthinkable happened. Our 3-year-old son Gus was abducted by a stranger on a beach in Nova Scotia. After a 45-minute search and calls to 911, we found him unharmed and returned home safely. It was one of the most traumatic days of our life.

We awoke the next day feeling like God was telling us we needed to leave. Things were getting harder and we were isolated and lonely. God had never let us down before, and we were determined to stay strong in our faith and trust that there was a place for us. Doug had just finished a new song called "Open Heart". The lyrics of the song are:

"When you start with an open heart,
love will meet you even in the dark.
One door closes,
another cracks,
push it open and don't look back.
You'll step into magic moments,
when you start with an open heart."

Through tears in our eyes and heavy hearts, we shot the music video for the song. We danced on the beach and there was an amazing sunset in the sky. The next morning, we made a call to friends asking for advice, and within hours, we had a homestead in South Carolina to go to.

Time and time again, we've learned that when you leave space for God to show up, the holy spirit brings peace and comfort and breaks through the darkness.



Monday, March 31

Surrendering

George Hellmuth

I was born in 1966 on an Air Force base in New Mexico. My father had joined the Air Force to avoid being drafted during the Vietnam War, and my young mother embraced the adventure of military life. We moved often—eleven homes by the time I was eleven.

Amidst these moves, a congenital heart defect in my aorta went undetected. I suffered from leg pain, but military doctors dismissed it as growing pains. At six, while living in St. Louis, a pediatrician discovered the issue—coarctation of the aorta, a narrowing that required surgery. My memories of that time are spotty, but I imagine how terrifying it was for my parents.

Thirty years later, I was living in Colorado with my wife and two daughters. Though healthy, I had uncontrolled high blood pressure. My mother had suffered from schizophrenia, and perhaps because of the chaos in my childhood, my parents never relayed that my childhood repair would need replacement as an adult.

One day, I received a call from Dr. Yetman at UC Health. A team of surgeons had reviewed my tests—I needed immediate open-heart surgery. Could I make Tuesday work? I had run two marathons that year. I thought I was healthy.

I am a worrier, and this news only heightened my stress. My startup had gone bankrupt, and as a contractor, I wouldn't be paid if I didn't work. Yet, I prayed. I knew that, no matter what, Christ had saved me. If I died on the operating table, I believed I would be with him. I also knew my wife was strong in her faith and would endure.

But what I couldn't reconcile was leaving my young daughters behind. The thought of them growing up without a father shattered my peace. I rationalized that they had a loving mother, a supportive family, and a strong church community. Still, I couldn't shake my fear.

The night before surgery, God answered my prayer. Sitting in my car at the mailbox, I felt an overwhelming urge to surrender completely—to lean back into Christ's love. My arrogance had been blocking my path to peace. I realized that God did not need me to raise my daughters—God loved them more than I ever could. I could trust God completely.

At that moment, peace washed over me. I understood that my security wasn't in my efforts, my work, or my plans—it was in Christ, who had already taken care of everything. Though I struggle daily to live in this surrender, I rest in the grace of a forgiving God who knows what it is to be human.



Tuesday, April 1

Giving Thanks

Tom and Judy Richter

We had many depressing things happen to us in 2024 making us feeling lost in the "Wilderness"

- Tom's 2000 truck, which he had for over 19 years, was stolen while he was buying wine for Judy's 80th surprise birthday party.
- Easter weekend Judy went to the emergency room with a UTI that turned into sepsis and the doctor told us that if we would have waited 15 minutes more, in his words, she would have been "dead."
- In April we had a windstorm that took down our neighbors 50 year old Blue Spruce which did extreme damage to Judy's back garden. This caused untold problems with the neighbor which made Tom move his pond in by 18", by moving enormous rocks.
- Judy had a couple of run-ins with her gardens that caused her to require wound care treatments to mend two large skin tears.
- The wound specialist noticed a mark on Judy's neck and insisted she see a dermatologist. It turned out to be Merkel Cell Cancer, which is so rare it happens in only $\frac{3}{4}$ of one person out of 100,000 people.
- In May, Tom's older brother Dick died.

It was Pastor Julie who wrote in one of Tuesday emails about Sarah Josepha Hale, a tireless advocate for Thanksgiving. What we saw in this letter about Sarah fighting to be thankful during a time when brothers were fighting against each other, gave us the "Hope in the Wilderness" that we needed to be thankful for all the good things that appeared to be devastating to us:

- Tom has a 2019 truck that Judy loves much more than the old "Bumpidy Bump" as she called his old truck.
- God saying it was not time yet means we have many more 15 minutes with Judy.
- After six months, Judy's backyard was back in shape and most important Tom's son Keith and daughter-in-law Cari, came out for a long weekend to help build the new pergola and rebuild the gardens. This was very rewarding to see father/son working together.
- Tom gained a lot of knowledge about skin tears and with the last tear he was able to preserve 90% of the skin.
- Judy and others say she is just "special" to survive this very rare cancer. The surgeon did an outstanding job to cover up the 2" hole that he took out of her neck.
- At Tom's brother's service a gratifying event happened. All 10 grandchildren of Tom's parents were all together for the first time in 27 years.

Thanks to Pastor Julie's letter, we realized that many blessings came to us which helped us continue through this "wilderness." More importantly, we were thankful to God for all the gifts which came to us in many different ways.

One last note of hope that life goes on despite this wilderness: We celebrated the birth of our third great grandchild, Collins Jean Richter, who was born on July 20.

Wednesday, April 2

It was the best of times. It was the worst of times.

Deb Sponnick

In August 2010, our daughter Lisa was engaged to be married, and we were excitedly planning her wedding, which was set for August 5, 2011. Then I got the phone call. My mom had been diagnosed with uterine cancer, and it had spread to her liver.

My parents lived in Minnesota for half the year and Florida for the other half. My mom's goal was to be in Colorado for the wedding! At first, wedding planning was a good distraction, but my mind quickly drifted to the what-ifs. As time went on, her condition worsened rapidly. My siblings and I started taking turns traveling to Florida to help our parents.

In May, I was in Florida for my shift. Mom wasn't doing well. She had experienced several complications and was in a rehab/nursing care facility—still insisting she was going to be at Lisa's wedding! However, I knew that wasn't going to be possible. What were we going to do about the wedding if she was dying?

At the end of June, we made the decision to med-flight her back to Minnesota. Upon arrival, the doctors informed us that we needed to come as soon as possible. She maybe had three days left. My mom passed on July 1, 2011—one month before Lisa's wedding. How could we celebrate a joyous occasion after such a loss? How could I carry on with so much grief? I asked God for strength and went into survival mode.

One month after my mom's funeral, we were all gathered in Colorado for the big day. Lisa was feeling a lot of guilt and needed assurance—permission, even—that it was okay to be happy and celebrate her special day. A few days before the wedding, I prayed to God for a sign that my mom would be with us. She had always loved hummingbirds, which had been an integral part of her funeral.

The wedding was at an outdoor venue. On the night of the rehearsal, the bridal party stood at the front while Jim, my dad, and I sat in the front row. Behind them was a garden. Suddenly, my daughter-in-law Jenn tried to discreetly get my attention. "Look!" she whispered, pointing to the garden. A hummingbird was flying back and forth in front of the bridal party! I got my sign. My mom was there with us. A feeling of peace washed over me.

The wedding was amazing. Everyone commented on how wonderful it was to have a joyful occasion bring us back together after so much sorrow. My mom would have wanted us to celebrate Lisa and Mike without her situation overshadowing the day. I truly believe she and God had a hand in the timing of everything.

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times...

Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. Isaiah 41:10

Thursday, April 3

Hope in Thy Self

Morgan Fletcher

I am my ancestors' great surprise. I come from a long line of incredibly strong women who led from within their familial and societal roles. Even though they didn't push the boundaries of what those roles could be, they passed along their strength—the strength to care for others and to lead without a title. While all my sisters have taken leadership to new levels, I have been the one to challenge the familial and societal roles we were given.

I was raised Southern Baptist, Catholic adjacent, as it was my mother's faith tradition. My wilderness season around my calling began in high school when I felt a stirring in my soul to be in leadership at church—but the ecclesiastically approved paths only agitated that stirring further, creating a whirlwind of wonder within me.

In my college Christian Ethics course, I began to reconcile that perhaps the lanes I had been given weren't the only ones to pursue. I would be the one to take the next steps—steps filled with both trepidation and awe—into something unknown, not just for me but for my whole family. Though I am named after my grandfather, a bi-vocational minister in Oklahoma, I am not the person he would have envisioned carrying on his pastoral legacy.

To be my authentic self, I had to say goodbye to family acceptance and understanding. I had to sacrifice relationships with my brothers, who disapproved of my calling, and I had to practice a theology that was both liberating and life-giving—even though it felt foreign and familiar all at once.

Moving through this wilderness season was not something I managed on my own. I had to find mentors and a community who taught me that following the stirring within me was not just the whim of a young person but an act of courage. My younger self was brave enough to proclaim that she needed something new—she needed a theology of hope, peace, joy, and love.

From this place of liberating grace, I came to see my journey toward pastoral identity as a wilderness experience. Now, having been an ordained Baptist pastor for thirteen years, I can say that the losses and misunderstandings from some in my family of origin have been painful. And yet, the calling to boldly break the mold of what my family had offered me—for the sake of my Belovedness—has been sweeter than I could have ever imagined.

My wilderness season has taught me how to ground myself in my Belovedness when smaller wilderness seasons arise. I have learned to stay rooted in God's love and grace because God's prophetic imagination includes me—a Southern Baptist-Catholic woman becoming an ordained pastor. I used to shy away from how different I am from my family of origin, from how much of a surprise I am to my ancestors. Now, I give thanks for the courage to be different and for the ability to continue to wonder at the legacy of that wilderness time.

The Wilderness of Grief

Andrea Boughton

When my middle child, a son, died ten years ago at the age of 28, I was astonished. That's not how it's supposed to work. You wouldn't think it's possible to recover from something like that, and frankly, it's not. It will always be with me—nagging, goading, stinging. Guilt, grief, respite—periods of grief broken up by periods of guilt for enjoying the respite—none of that has gone away. Ten years on, the grief is less intense, but it is chronic.

I have never blamed God for my son's sudden and unexplained death. People die. It happens, and ultimately, no one gets out of here alive. But realizing that I don't get special treatment from God didn't lessen my grief.

In fact, it created distance between us, and that distance still underlies my faith. But here's the thing—the Jesus I see in the Bible, the red-letter Jesus, is hard to be mad at and hard to dismiss.

In the worst times of grief, he seems irrelevant and remote. But he abides. He's always there, calling me to get up, look around, and devise a decent plan for the rest of my life. Slamming the Bible shut doesn't erase my experience of the Good Shepherd, who said, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10).

I have found that abundant life is still possible in the center of grief. I can be grateful for the time I had with my happy, funny, short-lived son. I am grateful for my surviving son and daughter and for the abundance of joy their mere existence brings into my life.

And I'm grateful for the lessons I've had to learn about the preciousness of life, love, and happiness (even if happiness is impermanent). Those three gifts are at the center of abundant life for me. They give me great hope because they have survived my grief.

Saturday, April 5

The Wilderness of Alzheimer's

Marilyn VeNard

2 Corinthians 4:16-18

So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

The day that Pastor Julie asked me to write a Lenten devotion, I read an article in one of my daily devotions that was perfect for me, having lost my husband Jim, after 62 years of marriage, to Alzheimer's disease.

In the article, the author, Karen Huang, writes about her father. She says, "It was painful to see my dad losing his memory. Dementia is cruel, taking away all the recollections of people until there's no remembrance left of the life they lived. One night I had a dream. I believe God used the dream to encourage me. In the dream God had a small treasure chest in his hands. *All your dad's memories are safely stored here. God told me, I'll keep them in the meantime. Then one day, in heaven, I'll return them to him.* In the following years, this dream comforted me whenever my dad didn't know who I was. I'd be reminded that his disease was temporary. Because my dad was a child of God, he'd be permanently restored one day."

This story gives me hope for others, like Jim, who live in the wilderness of Alzheimer's.



Monday, April 7

In the Storm

Patrice Von Stroh

A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But [Jesus] was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. -Mark 4:37-39

In May 2011, our family received devastating news: my husband, Gordon, was diagnosed with ALS, a progressive neurodegenerative disease with no cure, and very little in the way of treatment. He had started having weakness of his dominant hand a couple of years before, and over time began experiencing weakness in his other extremities as well. But now, he was having serious trouble breathing, and that finally led to a proper diagnosis. Practically overnight, my previously strong, independent husband was homebound, and dependent on others.

We began to regroup as a family, and we made a promise to find blessings every day. To trust in God to find peace in the storm.

I was a pastor between calls, and I put that on pause so I could care for him. Daughter Christina came over as often as she could to pitch in. Son Jonathan and his wife Jenny lived across the country, and they called often. Jenny worked with Gordon to take over his consulting project doing surveys each quarter for the apartment industry. Son Justin, who was in the midst of job hunting, came most days to help. The local ALS chapter offered support groups and arranged loans of free equipment. Amazing things started to happen. We began to find peace in the storm.

Other professors in his department at DU offered to take his classes. A group of them took him to a Broncos game. A group of church friends occasionally "kidnapped" him for lunch, so the family could have a respite. Friends would invite me out as well. My clergy colleagues were so supportive of me.

Gordon was on quite a few volunteer boards. Board members would take him to meetings, or come to our house for meetings. One group even created an award, and planned an event to honor him (with over 200 in attendance, and even a declaration from the Governor!).

Ten months later, in March 2012, Gordon died.

Jesus stilled the storm. The disciples were safe from drowning, yet now they were in a dead calm. It would take a lot of hard rowing to get to shore. For ten months, our whole focus had been on Gordon. For me, every day had been planned around caring for him. What would I do with my days now?

I find that every hard time, every crisis means adapting to a new normal. It's hard work that doesn't ever end. For me, the storm has stilled. I do have peace. And I'm still rowing.

You're Free

Marjorie Laird

The wilderness was almost like home to me in my young adult years. The advice I received about handling painful times was as follows:

- Don't be a crybaby.
- Don't ask for help; it's a sign of weakness.
- Keep your feelings to yourself.
- Don't bother God—God has bigger things to do.

I tried very hard to live by these rules, but as I walked through dismal days, dark and painful experiences, unimaginable losses, and long stays in the wilderness, I realized that God was with me, showing me a very different approach to grief and challenges.

Through life's wilderness journeys, the study of God's Word, and learning about the deep connection between the body, mind, and spirit, I discovered that the truth was far different from what I had been taught. My strength and hope now come from knowing that God cherishes my tears—and that tears are good for me. I need a community of friends with whom I can share and care. God's Word tells me to ask for help. I am encouraged to bring everything to God. I am reminded that I am a child of God.

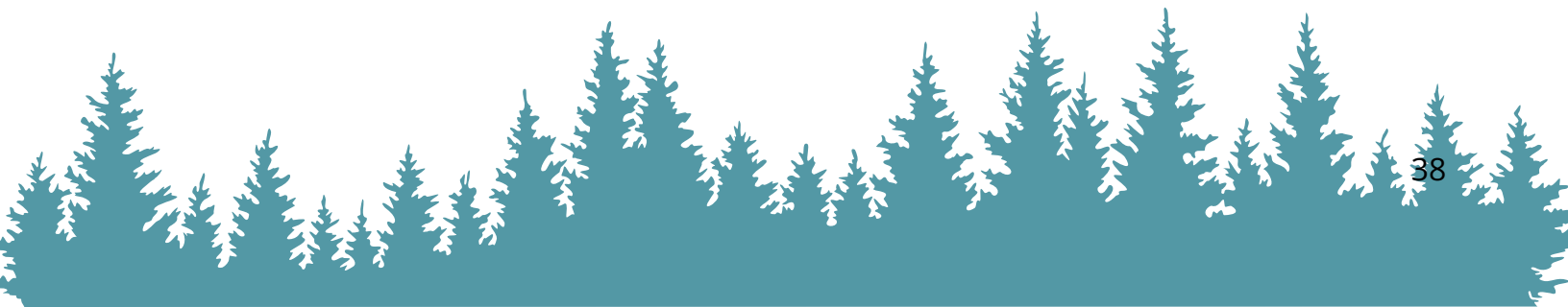
When moving forward after a wilderness experience, I often write poetry in my journal. Here are a few examples from various healing moments, with hope shining through the window of my heart:

You're not bound to the past
That says, "CAN'T"
You're free
To live in the now,
Your own person to be.
Be a super person? No!
Throw that thought away.
Be you—just you—God loves you.
Why not begin today?

God's love, like a gigantic wave,
Lifts from out of the sea.
Its foam sweeps quietly over the earth,
Touching you—touching me.

I've felt its gentle touch,
Sometimes ... not so much,
But enough to know God's love is free.
I'm a child of God, and God loves me.

And:



Wednesday, April 9

The Presence of God

Shirley Johnson

For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope. Romans 15:4

Reflecting on hope during difficult times led me back to my childhood. My brother and I grew up in a dysfunctional family impacted by our grandfather's alcoholism. He passed away when I was just a year old and although I never knew him, the chaos he left behind with our father deeply affected my brother and me. My counselor recently described our childhood as traumatic, and undeniably, our entire childhood was incredibly disturbing and painful for us.

Amidst the turmoil, God provided me a profound glimpse of hope. At the age of seven, my grandmother on my mother's side took us to church for the first time. I was unfamiliar with God, but stepping into that church was transformative. The beauty of the stained-glass windows and the large figure of Jesus in the stained-glass at the front evoked a sense of awe. In that moment, I felt God calling to me, assuring me that he would be there for me. From that day, my brother and I attended church nearly every Sunday and I found comfort from God when life was overwhelming.

I began to understand that God was guiding me toward a better path, instilling a hope that has grown ever since. That day, I realized that God cared for me and had a purpose for my life. Over the years, I have faced many challenges, each serving as more lessons on coping and leaning on God. Though these experiences were not enjoyable and sometimes very painful, I recognized that God was with me, using them for my growth.

Currently, I am attempting to find my way through numerous surgeries and health issues, feeling completely overwhelmed. The overwhelm has seeped into other areas of my life, creating chaos. God made me aware that he would be leading me on a spiritual journey during this time. When I said "Really?" He didn't respond directly. Since then, God has presented me with many lessons amidst my struggles.

God has surrounded me with incredible people and my husband has selflessly been taking care of me and driving me everywhere. Thankfully, our son and daughter-in-law returned home after seven years overseas, providing much-needed support.

I am reminded of God's constant presence, even when wrestling with pain and fatigue. While God hasn't removed my challenges, I've learned to cope and seek help, relying entirely on God. I do know that it's never too late to discern what God wants us to learn in the wilderness times, to discover how to depend on God and to find the hope that comes from knowing that God's got us. The peace and joy that I've experienced has been life altering.

God of compassion, Give us the ability to see you in our wilderness times when we can't see the way. Assist us as we attempt to hear your voice. Quiet us so that we can hear you. Amen

Reminders

Gail Mundt

Always remember what you have been taught, and don't let go of it. Keep all that you have learned; it is the most important thing in life. Proverbs 4:13

I've been a list-maker and calendar-keeper from way back. I started keeping a calendar in junior high, recording on my (free) Hallmark calendar school assignments, tests, church youth group activities, fun events with friends and family, and anything I thought I needed to remember. The to-do lists tracked the needed steps to complete tasks and assignments.

These visual reminders helped my brain from being muddled and bewildered. I still use these tools to keep me on track. If something is recorded, it will most likely happen. If not, all bets are off. This devotion, for example. Because I'm now retired, and no longer have multiple "assignments," I thought I'd easily remember and work on it in a timely fashion. Ha! Not writing it on my calendar, I forgot and remembered and forgot again, way too many times.

What tools do we use to remember God's love for the world and keep track of our faith? In these busy and too-often acrimonious days, we need to look for ways to focus on receiving and giving love.

When we attend worship services weekly, we are blessed with "tools" to live our faith: We hear the scripture, sing songs of faith, pray for ourselves, our community, and our world, learn through the sermons how to live as Christ-followers, and weekly we receive communion, hearing these amazing words of Christ: "This is my body and blood given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

In between worship services, we can incorporate daily prayers such as gratitude before meals, seeing beauty, and experiencing joy. Many find strength through daily devotions, podcasts, joining a class, and/or talking with friends.

The main thing to remember is to look for ways to share the love of God - by being loving. We are all led by the Holy Spirit in many and various ways to the love of God - and then, in kind, to share that love with others. If you'd like to remember this more often, take the time to track, plan, and/or record the love, grace, and mercy you witness and experience.

But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. John 14:26

On the Trail

Deb Tuggle

In early 2024, I received news that no one wants to hear: "You have cancer." Your life suddenly becomes a series of doctor appointments, tests, and options—raising more questions than answers and offering little certainty about the future. Talk about falling into the wilderness! You can either give in to the forces around you or choose a direction for yourself, place one foot in front of the other, and pray for God's guidance.

And how does God show you that things are moving forward? Yes, I know the familiar reassurance—"God is always with you in good times and bad. You just have to believe." But in my experience, having people around me—soothing my fears and nurturing my soul—has offered tangible reassurance that I am not alone.

Do any of us overcome challenges entirely on our own? Consider a baseball player. He steps up to the plate, hoping to score, but in truth, he's not a power hitter. Still, he needs to get to first base. A walk, an error—it doesn't matter how he gets there, only that he does. Standing on first, he can now see his next objective: second base. He knows he's a fast runner, so he watches the pitcher closely and takes off at just the right moment, making it safely to second.

To score, however, he needs help. His teammate hits the perfect bunt, allowing him to slide into third. Almost home, he still can't do it alone. The next batter hits a long fly ball to left field. Our runner tags up, plays to his strengths, and races home. He has accomplished his mission—one base at a time—using his own talents but, more importantly, relying on the unselfish talents of his teammates. He got where he wanted to go with a little help from his friends.

When you are in the wilderness, no matter how skilled you are with a compass, how well you read the stars, or how carefully you follow a map, it helps to meet others on the trail. These chance encounters may tell you to go right, go left, or sometimes even turn around and head back the way you came. Such encounters teach humility—reminding you that your map-reading skills aren't always perfect. But more importantly, they teach us the value of relationships and the importance of human interactions motivated by something greater than personal success: helping others achieve their goals, not just focusing on our own.

Dear God,

Thank you for surrounding us with family, friends, colleagues, and ministers who manifest your continued presence in our lives. Each encounter lifts the loneliness and uncertainty that visit us from time to time. You create an environment where, even in the worst of times, we continue to abide in hope and, with a little help from our friends, enter into a deeper relationship with you.

Amen

Saturday, April 12

Hope Through Pain

Carol DeHerrera

It was a dark and sorrowful time in my life. In 2017, my husband died a suffocating death from esophageal cancer. I watched the life pass from him as he reached out to heaven. Every day, I wondered how I could live and breathe without his corny jokes and positive attitude. How am I going to make it through these days and nights? How am I going to make it to tomorrow?

Every TV program seemed to mention esophageal cancer. Every song we had enjoyed together stung my heart. Dance music reminded me that I had lost my ballroom dancer, and I have not gone dancing since he died. I thought to myself, once I have danced with the best, how can I dance with anyone else? I have not had the courage to walk through the doors of any ballroom since then.

At that time, we had been attending St. Francis Cabrini Catholic Church. I continued going for a few more months, sitting in the same pew where we had always sat—until it became too painful to sit beside the empty space where my husband once was. I longed to return to my Lutheran roots and recalled a moment during my husband's illness when I had walked alone through the doors of Abiding Hope Church.

That day, I was met with a glorious sound—Glenn Hecox at the organ and a choir of exquisite voices praising the Lord. I could hardly believe it. This must be what heaven on earth is like, I thought. In Lent 2018, I returned to Abiding Hope. I sat in the back of the church, where I still sit to this day. And it was there that my story of hope through pain began.

Abiding Hope was presenting the Passion play, depicting the life of Jesus. As part of the performance, Jesus had just brought a child back to life. During a brief intermission, the actors walked silently down each aisle toward the narthex while the stage crew changed the scenery. I sat there, silently sobbing, overwhelmed with painful sadness, wondering why God hadn't saved my husband's life.

As I tried desperately to conceal my grief, I hesitantly looked up—and the actor playing Jesus noticed me crying. The next scene was about to begin, and the actors were returning to the altar. With my head still bowed and tears still flowing, I suddenly felt a soft touch on my shoulder. Instantly, a wave of warmth washed over me, from head to toe. I looked up and saw Jesus in the face of the actor gently smiling at me. His touch only left me when he could no longer reach as he walked forward.

In that moment, the Holy Spirit moved through him and into me. That day, I found hope in my sorrow. Glory to Jehovah, our God.

The March Continues

Pam Reitan

In January 2025, in the heart of winter, I took a journey with Abiding Hope and two other ELCA churches that would forever change my perspective on life. I have always been curious about the history of civil rights in America so when a space on the trip became available, I was eager to participate.

The journey started in Montgomery, at our historic hotel that was formerly a warehouse for enslaved people. I immediately felt immersed in the legacy of our past. During a guided walking tour of the historic downtown area, Jake, who had experienced the Civil Rights Movement as a child, shared his personal stories. He recounted picking cotton for his mother, a sharecropper, earning three cents per pound and facing a whipping if he did not meet his daily quota of 60 pounds. That amounted to just \$1.80 for a hard day's labor. Within a block from the hotel, we observed the main plaza where enslaved people were traded and the State Capitol, which features a statue of Jefferson Davis, the president of the Confederate States of America during the Civil War.

Walking through the exhibits at the Rosa Parks Museum, I observed her refusal to give up her seat to a white passenger, which led to a yearlong bus boycott. This action contributed to the Supreme Court's decision to outlaw racial segregation on public transportation.

In Birmingham, the Commissioner of Public Safety, Bill Connor unleashed dogs and high-powered water cannons on peaceful protestors, many of whom were children. The images of their bravery against such brutality left a lasting impact on me. While standing on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, I envisioned the courage and resolve of the marchers on Bloody Sunday.

Each stop along the trail enhanced my understanding of the sacrifices made by ordinary people, engaging in actions that ultimately had extraordinary impacts. I was deeply moved by the accounts of young people who had risked everything in the pursuit of equality.

This experience led me to reflect on my own life and privileges. I recognized that the struggle for civil rights is ongoing and needs my active involvement. Consequently, I have committed to greater participation in my community, advocating for social justice and equality.

The journey has fundamentally changed my perspective. My awareness of systemic racism and the imperative to stand up for what is right has been significantly heightened. I returned home with renewed hope and dedication to contributing to the continuous fight for justice and equality.

Tuesday, April 15

Made in God's Image

Marilyn Watson

It was a normal birth. My daughter had a scheduled induced delivery for her second child. The hours ticked by, yet my new grandson did not arrive. As the pain intensified, she requested pain medication—normal enough. But minutes later, the nurses called the doctor back in. He examined her and said, “Oh, too much?” Her contractions had stopped, and the baby was in distress. Soon, he arrived—blue and not breathing. He was whisked away to the NICU. A normal birth, until it wasn’t.

Palmer developed normally. He had occasional big outbursts, but he was a toddler with an older sibling vying for attention. He went to preschool but struggled to sit still and follow directions—an essential part of early education. Before long, my daughter was told Palmer could no longer attend that preschool. A normal kid, until he wasn’t.

He was soon diagnosed with ADHD, Asperger’s, anxiety, anger issues, and seizures. The dreams of a normal, happy family slipped away. Darkness enveloped them—and me.

On his first day of kindergarten, he told everyone excitedly, “I get FIVE recesses!!!”
The joy did not last long. His recesses were taken away for disciplinary reasons. He was crushed.

In first grade, he was required to carry a behavior chart everywhere. His parents were frequently called and told to come and get him—he couldn’t handle the full school day.

Palmer has a primary care doctor, one or two therapists, a family counselor, and a psychiatrist from Children’s Hospital. Yet despite these resources, the family lives in chaos, never knowing when he will hurt something or someone, or when the next outburst will come. Mom and Dad are consumed with anxiety, as is his 10-year-old sister. It was a normal two-child family, until it wasn’t.

Recently, Palmer came home and asked, “Why did God make me this way? Why do I have to be different?”

As a family, we walked in darkness, possibly asking the same question.

Then, one day, Palmer said, “Why can’t I just die?” The child is seven. His mother asked, “Do you know what that means—to die?” He answered, “Yes. I would go to heaven and be without you and Daddy, but you’d come soon. Everyone is happy in heaven.” As I write this, my heart is heavy and my eyes sting with tears.

But the family has found hope in the people God has placed in their lives. Special teachers have worked to create spaces where Palmer can thrive. A mothers' group for kids with special needs taught us not to look for "milestones" in his emotional development but instead "inch-stones." When insurance rejected a claim for counseling, a caring community member encouraged my daughter to train as a Certified Nurse's Aide. As Palmer's primary caregiver, the state helps pay for his and their counseling costs.

As a grandmother, I sometimes feel helpless. I am not as actively involved as his parents, but I drive him to some appointments and offer emotional support. I find hope in prayer and scripture. Like so many, I hold onto Jeremiah 29:11: "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope."

I, too, find hope in community. When Palmer expressed a desire to die and be happy in heaven, I called Pastor Doug. I find hope not just in wishing for a positive outcome, but in working toward one. I find hope in advancing medical research—believing that, someday soon, the right medication or therapy will be found to help him.

He is a beautiful little boy—smart and creative. He is God's child, made in God's image.

Finding Hope

Susan Shepard

Toward the end of January 2022, we received the phone call we had been hoping for—our youngest son, age 29, had been arrested. That might sound strange, but for several years, we had noticed changes in our son that deeply concerned us. He began calling us in the middle of the night, experiencing panic attacks, and showing signs of paranoia about people, the government, and his health. He even bought a drone to monitor police activity.

The police detectives on the line asked if we had concerns about his mental health, and we gratefully said yes. We were relieved that someone else recognized our son was not well. That was our family's introduction to our country's mental health and judicial system.

The past few years have been difficult, made even more complicated by distance, as our son lives in another state. We went through the court system to obtain guardianship over his healthcare, which allowed us to apply for disability benefits on his behalf—benefits he had paid into through his years of working. And yet, he continues to go through cycle after cycle of short-term hospitalizations, jail time, and, by choice, homelessness.

So, where do I see hope in this situation?

I admit that I go through spells of hopelessness—tears, grief over what the world has lost in all the gifts our son had to offer, the pain of watching his classmates marry, have children, and move forward with their lives while he remains stuck in this struggle. There is a hole left in our family.

And yet, my heart is warmed by the strangers who have helped our son—a public defender and an assistant district attorney who truly communicated with us, police officers who answered our questions and calls for help. Because I try to be open about our circumstances, I have met others who are also suffering through their own family's mental health challenges. My judgment of those standing on street corners has faded, replaced instead by the image of my own son's face.

Now, when I see them, I try to stop, park my car, ask their name, and gently ask if they have spoken with their mother or father. I tell them about my son and how much it means when I hear from him. I gladly hand them a McDonald's gift card so they can eat, go inside a restaurant, and use the restroom. I have friends who continue to hold us in prayer, ask about our son, encourage us in every way possible, and remind us that we have done everything within our power to be there for him.

Wednesday, April 16

Through a Facebook group for parents of children with schizophrenia, I have learned about medications, read similar stories of grief, and encountered families who live in constant fear for their own safety. But I have also read stories of hope—of children who finally found the right medication. Though some symptoms remain, and the side effects are difficult, there are moments of joy when parents see glimpses of the child they once knew.

I hold on to a God who loves my child more than I do, who walks alongside us every moment of every day. All these things keep hope in my heart.

God of compassion, who loves us beyond our understanding, we give you thanks for walking beside us through difficult circumstances. You provide people to care for us, strengthen us, and encourage us so that we do not lose hope. We trust that you are at work in our child because you love him even more than we do. We thank you for the years of memories we have of our son before his illness took hold, and for how you have changed us as we learn to trust in you. Amen

Maundy Thursday, April 17

Constant

Wadine Gehrke

But Jesus said, Suffer the little children, and forbid them not to come unto Me, for of such is the Kingdom of Heaven. Matthew 19:14.

Just watch! When children are waiting in line to receive communion, they appear happy and excited. The grownups may seem reflective or even solemn. After they are served, the children often hop down the stairs, and happily return to their seats. Over the years, I have been blessed to observe many children, including my children and grandchildren, joyfully share the Lord's Supper. It always gives me hope.

In 2019, my normal daily life was disrupted by health issues that continued to worsen. Then, the Covid pandemic, which caused such harm to countless people, created an isolating environment for everyone. For me, coping with illness and multiple medical procedures was overwhelming. I felt alone. I often thought about all of my wonderful hikes around the Maroon Bells, except it felt as if there was no path. I couldn't find my way. I struggled to find my purpose as I transitioned from my active law practice to a more restrictive life that required physical therapy in order to improve my strength and balance. My lung condition requires oxygen and causes vulnerability to diseases. I miss attending church in person, and having social activity.

My faith, prayers, the support of the church, with the love of my family and friends, have surrounded me and constantly remind me of the hope that God gives us all, even in times which are difficult to navigate. Being able to attend church virtually and experience the inspiring lessons and beautiful music brightens my life. I can have communion at home with my family. The kind women who create the prayer shawls gave me a lovely, warm shawl which comforts me while I read my Bible. Each time I read the Bible, I learn something new. Something will pique my interest so that I explore it to increase my understanding of the context of the subject. My hope is always renewed as I realize that God is the only constant we have and we must trust his wisdom and grace. I am truly blessed.

And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.
Romans 5:2-5

The Giver

Cathi Thelen

Hope in the Wilderness – what an apropos title for my life's journey over these past two years. On Saturday, January 28, 2023, our life was turned upside down. Our daughter, Gianna, who had undergone a simple knee surgery just two days earlier, experienced her "first death." She suffered a pulmonary embolism and was rushed to the hospital in an ambulance. Upon arrival, she coded. The doctor worked tirelessly to revive her and was able to restart her heart. However, she never regained consciousness. After 11 long days, we were faced with the agonizing, heart-wrenching decision to let her go. It was difficult, and yet it wasn't, because we knew it was the best thing for her, as her brain was in a constant state of seizing. At 8:50 p.m. on February 8, 2023, our lovely, silly, vibrant 35-year-old daughter went home, while I stroked her hair and sang to her, just as I had when she was a baby.

Where, you might ask, is the hope in that? The hope came from within Gianna herself. You see, she was an organ donor. There was never any question in her mind when she signed up for it! By being an organ donor, Gianna saved the lives of a baby who received her heart valve, two people who received her kidneys, and a woman who received her cornea, along with numerous others who benefited from her skin and tissue donations. She was always a giver—giving of herself to her friends, whether it was her time, an ear to listen, or money (which she never had, but constantly shared, much to my chagrin). She never asked for anything in return.

Losing a child is one of the most gut-wrenching experiences a parent can endure. It is the loss of the future for oneself—future dreams, legacy, the continuation of you... the loss of hope. But in experiencing Gianna's death, I have found new life in and around me—through my memories of her and who she was, through the rest of our family, through this Abiding Hope community in the love and support given to us throughout this wilderness journey, through my connection with God, and through her friends. My goodness, she had so many of them—more than I ever knew! They still, to this day, reach out to let me know how much they miss her and the impact she had on their lives. She changed many of them for the better, and they are living their lives as she did.

In these past two years, I have learned that there is no "getting over" a wilderness journey. Instead, you must go through it, enduring all the grief, anger, questioning, and experiences that come with it. And in this going through, hope is found—within self-reflection and discovery, but also through the help and love of those around you. May your wilderness journey bring you both hope and peace.



Hopelessness

Susie Gamelin

The wilderness overwhelmed me after my love, Tim, died. It showed up when things around me just didn't seem real. The wilderness was. I crawled into it at night when sorrow had worn me ragged. It was waiting for me in the morning, when I made myself get out of bed and start another painful day. A friend told me that he knew I wouldn't grieve Tim's death because I was a pastor. I crept back into the wilderness when comments like that let me know how alone I was in my grief.

One Sunday I returned to worship at Abiding Hope. I tried sitting where I had always sat with Tim, but felt only the loneliness that lurked there. Someone asked me that morning how I was. "Hopeless," I replied.

Now, almost four years later, I live with hope. It fills me as full as was the cistern at my grandma's cottage after a good rainstorm. "How did that happen?" friends ask, wishing that I would have a magic formula to share with the world. I didn't. No best-selling book promoting "Six Ways to Conquer Despair in Six Weeks." No lightning strike that shocked me out of hopelessness. No magic words that eradicated the wilderness. And I didn't grow sick and tired of brokenness and emptiness. Instead I'd gotten used to them in the wilderness where they lived with me.

What, then?

Time passed, weeks, months, and years, and the feeling of loss became less intense. Gradually, oh so gradually, I realized that the best time in my life was not over. Delight over sunrises began to surprise me. Friends did not disappear, including the one who said that I wouldn't need to mourn as he had when his wife died. New friends appeared, and nourished me with hugs. I remembered that my neighbors here, there, and everywhere needed love, and I still had love to give. My family was always there, holding me every time I was tempted to crawl back into the wilderness. It became more and more clear to me that God, oh yes, God, was in, with, and under me, even when I had pulled the covers over my head. God had always been there. God crawls into every wilderness with us and stays, bringing an unwavering light that fills the darkness and draws us out. God is in the love that Jesus told us about. It's visible in the patience and love of family and friends, in the sunrise, and all over Abiding Hope.

The best time in my life isn't over; it continues. These "best times" were not only in my past with Tim, but they're also here today and tomorrow. I know this. I know it because God abides in, with, and under everyone of us, filling us with hope no matter what.

Easter Sunday

Pastor Doug Hill

Luke 24:13-35 informs us that on the day of the resurrection, the resurrected Christ reveals himself to two people on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. The two people weren't in the desert but they were experiencing a wilderness. One of the persons is identified as Cleopas. We aren't given the name of the other person assuming that it is Cleopas' spouse. The two don't recognize Jesus and he begins to question them about why they were so down and depressed. At one point the two people tell Jesus about himself.

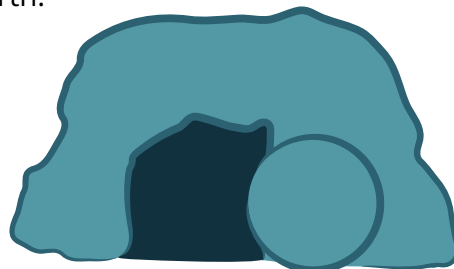
They say, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days...The things of Jesus of Nazareth who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel."

The couple, clearly followers of Jesus, were in Jerusalem when he was crucified. They waited until Sunday to travel home to Emmaus because they were forbidden to travel on Saturday as it was the sabbath day. Perhaps they had been hiding with the other disciples in the upper room in Jerusalem.

I'm struck by their sad words, "we had hoped." Their hope wasn't merely for themselves but for the people of Israel who had endured oppression under the weight of other nations such as Rome, as well as oppression under their own leaders. They yearned for a day of liberation for all people when hierarchies and monarchies and oligarchies no longer prevailed. They yearned for a day when justice would reign and every human being would have an opportunity to experience full and whole life.

Jesus uses the Hebrew scriptures to outline for the couple how all that had transpired had been prophesied. Jesus even says, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?"

Here's the point. When we believe that the path to full life, liberation, and justice for all should be smooth, we will be disappointed. What we see in the stories of scripture is that God's reign of life and justice bursts forth when things are their darkest. God doesn't promise a smooth ride. God promises that love and life will win. We can see God's reign most clearly juxtaposed against the violence, division, destruction, and death perpetrated by the powers and principalities of the world. It's in moments of darkness that we are called to raise our heads so that we can proclaim and participate in the new life that God is and will always bring forth.



Dear friends, we are resurrection people. Resurrection doesn't transcend from good times. Resurrection emerges out of pain and anguish. Jesus' resurrection on Sunday followed horrible acts of injustice and murder on Friday. So it is in our lives. It's when times are the worst that we are called to a posture of hope trusting that God is and will generate new life. As followers of Jesus, we are called to commit ourselves daily to the things that we know participate in generating new life within God's reign. None of us can predict what this new life will look like. We are simply called daily to acts of love, service, generosity, kindness, compassion, and gentleness during the darkness knowing that the light is about to dawn.

As you celebrate this Day of Resurrection, may you be transformed to live fully as a child of God. May you be a beacon of light amidst the darkness bringing hope, joy, and peace to all you encounter. May we never be despairing as we trust that God will never stop generating new life. And may we be seen as resurrection people living out of a deep trust that love and life win through the risen Christ.

Loving God, thank you for your promise of life. Fill us each day with your Holy Spirit so that we might see and feel your love breaking into the chaos of this world. Use us as instruments of hope and healing as we travel through the wilderness so that all may experience real life in Jesus' name. Amen

