



## Lenten Devotional 2006

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First Congregational Church of Berkeley  
United Church of Christ

*I am  
A hole in a flute  
That the Christ's breath moves through—  
Listen to this  
Music.*

Hafiz  
(c. 1320-1389)

Cover design by Phil Porter

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17, Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Promise

*I am holding promise in my arms  
her head heavy with tomorrow's thoughts and her belly full  
of expectation  
She lures me into her newborn gaze  
What does she look to?  
What truth does she rest upon?*

*She has arrived in the midst of this awkward time  
When the common currency is uncertainty  
When destiny is manufactured and sold  
What will be her heart's inheritance?  
What will she profit from our mistakes?*

*Yet the sky is filled with wonders and signs  
Hues of hope arcing beyond the horizon of reason  
Possibilities meeting her outstretched hand  
What is a soul's first choice?  
What tethers her now?*

*Promise is the table set before the meal  
The quiet before the storm  
The fast before the feast  
What will the first step be after the ashes are swept away?  
What will arise in us through her?*

Thursday, March 2

Kellie Stoddart

Habakkuk 3:1-18, John 17:1-8

### Jesus Prays For Himself

In today's New Testament passage, Jesus prays for himself and for his disciples. He talks more openly about how his death and resurrection will lead to eternal life for believers. Jesus was pleased that the disciples understood that God is at work in both the life (and death) of Jesus. This prayer is about both the fulfillment of God's rainbow promise and the beginning of a new covenant.

I can clearly see God at work in Jesus' teachings and actions *and* in the lives of other people. I love to hear stories of hoNew Members Who Joined on Feb. 12ovement of grace putting a person's gifts and talents in the right place at the right time to meet God's opportunity or to make the world a better place.

I sometimes have trouble with the idea of God being at work in my life, yet I know that a guiding force must be there. Finding my life partner was because of chance. My current job is the result of the recommendation of a complete stranger. I took a leap of faith to join this church. A persistent and insistent voice in my ear, a pulling and tugging in my gut, a yearning that just wouldn't go away—these are the signs that reminded me of God's love and presence as I contemplated change and moved toward God's covenant with me.

I invite you to take a moment to pray about God calling you in your life. What has been the result of that calling? Thank God for that! Where is it taking you now?

Friday, March 3

Michele McGeoy

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32, John 17:9-19

I have given them thy word; and the world hath hated them... John 17:14

### Reclaiming the "C word"

*It's amazing how one little word carries such a charge  
Not what it describes, just the word itself  
At the core it is this beautiful life-giving powerful force  
But the word has been so misused and abused it has lost its meaning  
Men use the "C word" to minimize and denigrate  
Utterance of the word is most often met with discomfort, drawing on  
some absurd message that you are somehow not perfect  
It's time we start using the "C word" for the deep compassion it represents  
Strip away the layers of hate and judgment  
Down to the core of the force it is  
Ok, here goes  
Listen with an open mind and try not to shudder when you hear it  
"Christ"*

Procrastinating on this writing, I was relieved to find a Bible while in line for the bathroom at the back of the plane. The gay flight attendant saw me pick it up and, laughing, told how at Easter service his mother made him walk behind her because she was ashamed.

He joked about his sinful life and then the woman behind jumped in. It clearly had not occurred to them that I might actually be a Christian or, if it did, they had no concern about offending me.

I can relate to being offended by righteous Christians. Their reaction didn't surprise me, it just saddened me. As I grow in faith and find more comfort in the teachings, I want to share it with others.

The best way I can do that is simply to be as much like Christ as I possibly can. I just wish I didn't feel like I had to be in the closet about it.

Saturday, March 4

Mary Haake

Ezekiel 39:21-29, John 17:20-26

Last fall Nick and Annis Kulkan made an invitation which is changing my life. They asked for people to travel with them this April to Guatemala in support of Common Hope, an organization which assists impoverished families through education and community development. Saying yes, I committed myself to a particular kind of Easter vigil: witnessing the crucifixion by remembering the terrible story of oppression, rebellion, and violence which took the lives of over 300,000 people in Central America; remembering that U.S. intervention helped pound nails in all those crosses and that I live richly off the fat of that empire.

It's not the only crucifixion on my mind. Consider the gruesome nightmare of gang and drug-related violence which is devastating communities in Oakland, Richmond, San Francisco and everywhere in this promised land. It is a bitter truth that when white children killed white children in Littleton it was a national emergency. But when year after year poor youth of color kill each other it's not an emergency, just a silent scream played nightly on the news.

Ezekiel was witness to the crucifixion of his times—the exile and captivity of the Jewish people. His consolation was to find the punishment just, the people repentant and God's love abiding: "Now I will restore the fortunes of Jacob, and have mercy on the whole house of Israel..." John's witness to the crucifixion of Christ expanded God's covenant beyond birthright to belief and beyond law to unconditional love. John heard Jesus saying to God: "I made known to them thy name, and I will make it known, that the love with which thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them." Both Ezekiel and John knew that the heart of God is forgiving love.

This spring, as I journey with FCCB from Ash Wednesday to Good Friday to Easter, I am hoping to discover again the resurrecting power of human connection and shared longing for justice. I pray that I witness that resurrection in the human dignity and compassion of the people of Guatemala and in the love, strength and wisdom of the people here affected by community violence. Thanks to Nick and Annis for inviting me into that prayer and to everyone at FCCB for sharing the journey.

Sunday, March 5

Barbara Grady-Ayer

Genesis 9:8-17, Mark 1:9-15

In today's New Testament reading, Mark begins by telling of Jesus' baptism at the river by his dearly loved cousin, John. As Jesus comes out of the water, he sees the Holy Spirit descend from the heavens and hears the voice of God calling him His beloved son. It is an ecstatic moment for Jesus. Then, pop, suddenly in verse 12, Mark says Satan drives Jesus into the wilderness.

As I read it, I wondered why Mark didn't provide a smoother transition—even a few words—between these two events. Couldn't Jesus have lingered at the riverside a while and celebrated his baptism?

Then it hit me how utterly human this sequence of experiences in Jesus' life was. How often we go—I go—from moments of intense joy with family or close friends to moments of doubt, despair and loneliness. How suddenly tragedy enters our lives. When has a heart attack or diagnosis of cancer ever come with a smooth transition? Mark shows us the humanity of Jesus by telling these stories of his life in their staccato sequence. We see how Jesus experienced joy and pain in the same unannounced ways as we do. Perhaps that is why Jesus is said to understand us, and all our human strengths and weaknesses, because he shared them.

Interestingly, Jesus did not succumb to Satan's taunt to end his hunger and thirst in the desert by miraculously conjuring up a loaf of bread and a cup of water. Sometimes we plead with God to let us avoid troubles, to provide a smooth road for us. Sometimes we pray for miracles. God never promised us a smooth road. If God had made such a promise, suffering wouldn't fall so randomly on the undeserving or so disproportionately on people in the Southern Hemisphere.

As Lent begins, I pray that I can sense when Jesus is with me, offering empathy and shared experience but not answers. I pray that I can live each day fully and generously, with the understanding that tomorrow may bring a whole new set of circumstances.

Monday, March 6

Charlotte Gustafson

Genesis 37:1-11, Mark 1:1-13

The man was lying on the white sidewalk face up to the radiating sun, his left forearm shielding his eyes, his right arm at his side within reach of his crutches.

We paused on the corner of Bonita and Vine Streets. Alive? Drunk? Homeless? Faint? Ill?

"Are you all right?" No response. We looked at each other, and stepped nearer.

"I gave up. I just lay down and I gave up. I can't get a job doing my construction work. The doctor said I must stay off my feet, elevate my leg, rest."

He sat up. We moved to assist him. He quickly used his crutches to stand. We three moved slowly toward the tree's shade.

"My friend always breaks his promises. He said he'd be back to drive me. It's getting late to get my errands done. My landlady is a bitch. I can't pay the rent when I can't work! I do what I can. The police and the social welfare people tell me what to do, where to go, who to call. No god damn help anywhere. Pardon, ma'am."

I smile.

"I'm a vet. They're no help. What am I supposed to do? Just Give Up!"

We looked from him to each other. What are we supposed to do? Offer money? Call the church, find him a new resource? What do we do? What would Jesus do?

The man took a slow breath. "Thanks for listening. You guys listening, just listening. Thanks for asking how I was. You've made all the difference. God bless you now. Thanks again."

He crossed the street.

Tuesday, March 7

Tom Fletcher

Genesis 37:12-24, Mark 1:14-28

Please consider the New Testament reading from Mark 1:14-28, particularly verses 21-28. These verses tell the story of Jesus casting out an unclean spirit. The story begins simply enough with Jesus teaching in the temple when a possessed man disrupts the lesson. The spirit identifies Jesus as the "Holy One of God," but Jesus silences it and casts it out. This exorcism impresses all of the students, who quickly spread word of Jesus' new teaching and his power. That Jesus silences the unclean spirit to prevent it from revealing that he is the Son of God initially troubled me. If Jesus is beginning his ministry to spread the good news, why conceal his true identity?

This vexed me for a week. But then I remembered a satirical bumper sticker I'd once seen in traffic: "JESUS IS COMING! Quick, everyone look busy!"

Were it obvious that Jesus was the Son of God, the decision to become a disciple would have been trivial. It would minimize the bravery and earnestness of Jesus' first disciples (called in Mark 1:16-20). If the demon had revealed to them the true identity of their teacher, wouldn't we think their devotion to him was motivated more by self-interest than by loyalty?

Consider another facet of this story from the disciple's perspective. You have started following Jesus, learning his teachings, and trying to do similar works. Believing that he is a fellow human makes his life of Christian principles appear attainable. If he can live this more holy life, so can I! Remember *The Phantom Tollbooth*? Aspiring to live by these difficult ideals is possible only because we believe we can do it. In this way, Jesus nurtured the belief in his disciples that they could achieve more—something that comforts me as a student every day.

Wednesday, March 8

Margie Allen

Genesis 37:25-36—The Selling of Joseph into Slavery  
Mark 1:29-45—The Healing of the Leper

I am touched by the poignancy of these stories. Joseph, by all accounts a bright and lively child, is delivered into slavery by his own brothers and is taken to live in a strange land. Jesus finds himself in the midst of his itinerant healing ministry, besieged by crowds. He admonishes the healed leper not to pass his story around but, instead, to go to the temple and make an offering, presumably in thanksgiving. But the leper is unable to keep the astounding news to himself. Soon, Jesus finds he can no longer go into towns openly and so removes himself to the country.

These stories both speak of isolation and suggest a quiet current of yearning. Joseph can't speak the language of his captors, their customs are surely foreign to him and he is in bondage to them. And he is still a boy, on the brink of adolescence. Surely he must have grieved deeply for the loss of his family, his tribe, his country. I'm not sure it's "good theology" to suppose that Jesus, too, grieved for the isolation his radical ministry required of him. But I think he did. His departure into the countryside suggests as much. And I think that isolation must have been one of the hardest circumstances he faced.

What tools do we have to manage our own isolation? Joseph managed by doing well the job given to him and lived to be reconciled with his brothers. Jesus prayed without ceasing. He led by example. He exhorted his disciples to carry the Word to the people. And he died, a lonely, horrible death. He nearly gave up on God, but God didn't give up on him. And so, too, with us. In our starkest need, God remains with us whether we know it or not.

Thursday, March 9

Rebecca Suzanne

Genesis 39:1-23, Mark 2:1-12

Forgiveness. Such a simple word that means so much. Forgiveness has the power to transform lives, to induce spontaneous healing, to open our hearts.

In my meditation group last week, one woman sat wracked with grief and anger over a personal dilemma. She was particularly frustrated with herself that she couldn't let it all go, just forgive and move on. Our facilitator remarked, "You can't force yourself to forgive. Forgiveness comes from the divine."

Three days from now I will put down my 16-year-old, chronically ill cat. I have been feeling guilty, praying that he will forgive me for this difficult decision. As the sadness of these last days moves through me I realize that what I need most is my own forgiveness. Until I am able to forgive myself for all my transgressions, both real and imagined, I will not be able to accept the forgiveness of others. And until I am able to forgive others, I won't be truly free.

Yet forgiveness is not something I can will. It comes from the divine. It is a gift that suddenly floods my body and washes away the constrictions that keep me from being fully human, fully present. Forgiveness washes away my sins.

I can't force forgiveness, but I can do the footwork: God, help me to let go of my will and open myself to your divine presence. Help me to feel safe and loved. Help me to feel the miracle of forgiveness one more time.

Friday, March 10

Kate Vergeer

Genesis 40:1-23, Mark 2:13-22

I recently browsed through *Genesis: A Living Conversation*, from the PBS series in which Bill Moyers conversed with lay persons and biblical scholars—Christian, Jewish, and Islamic—about the first book of the Bible.

Realities were emphasized. Forget the colorful ark floating on gentle, sanitized waves. Remember wild Katrina rains and floodwaters full of mud and terrible decay.

There was anger. How could God return the world to the chaos of primal waters? Isn't the destruction of all but a privileged few—those "inside the box" of the ark—like the Holocaust? Childhood terrors were renewed by God's destructive response to human waywardness.

Several felt that God "matured," awakened more fully to humankind as a result of the flood, accepted the flawed human condition and pitied our burden of freedom to say yes or no—to err. Noah's psychology was explored—as a man of faith, going onto water in a flimsy craft while others were still on firm ground—and as a damaged man, bystander to the suffering of others. There was Noah the survivor (drowning his survivor's guilt in wine?) and Noah, the second Adam, founding a new dynasty.

Agreement was finally reached with the rainbow and God's covenant. God was seen as coming to humankind with open arms, affirming love for *all* of God's creation. Establishing the rainbow as a reminder—to God as well as man. "Life will always be renewed, there is always hope. Not even man's error can break the covenant."

The covenant between God and humanity sets a standard. We humans must care for one another as God cares for us

At its heart, the story of Noah is about the rise of a community of faith, the struggle of real men and women to know what it means to be people of God.

Saturday, March 11

Karyn Smith

## Genesis 41:1-13, Mark 2:23–3:6

Remembering to keep the Sabbath day “holy” (fourth commandment: Exodus 20:8) seems really difficult in our busy lives and fast-paced society. There is always so much to do! I can work myself into a frenzy, until I feel exhausted, resentful and empty.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus shares an important truth: “the Sabbath was made for people, and not people for the Sabbath.” (Mark 2:27) As people, we need Sabbath time, time to sit and be still, time to reflect and ponder, time to tune into the life around us.

One of my favorite children’s books is *Wise Child* by Monica Furlong. Juniper, the local wise woman and healer, explains to her apprentice, Wise Child, that “dorans” are “those who live... in the rhythm. Who watch the seasons. Who die with the winter and rise with spring.” Carol Lee Flinders, in her book *At the Root of this Longing*, also ponders “the mysterious rhythm of all things... the ebb and flow of virtually everything in life and [how] to move with it...” She suggests that discernment—a fruit of meditation—is about “being able to see into the heart of things in the moment and make the best choices accordingly.” She argues that sometimes it isn’t a matter of whether we do something, but when.

It does seem that life has a “rhythm” to it that we can try to be aware of and move within—or try to ignore and force our way through. Trying to pay attention to the rhythm or cycles in nature helps me attune to the personal cycles within my family and my own body and spirit. As I watch the weather to see if I can hang clothes on the line or garden, as I plan meals based on what’s available at the farmers’ market, or as I choose to sit when the house is quiet, I feel that I am honoring the rhythm of that day, acknowledging that each day is a unique gift and therefore holy.

Sunday, March 12

Carol Bono

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16, Mark 9:2-9

Lent is a time to remove whatever distracts me and to discern what remains. When I lived alone I would walk through my home, and into boxes would go all adornments that sat on shelves, hung on walls, or cluttered my desk or dresser, including my precious things from my little altar: papers with prayers written on them, gifts from spiritual teachers, photographs, objects that reminded me of people in my life whose influence transformed me. After those things were packed away (and there were plenty because I love being surrounded by beautiful, interesting things), then I would go through my space again, putting useful objects out of sight into drawers or cupboards. I put my TV away and limited what I listened to or read. Over time, I became accustomed to a world in which I sought God's presence in barrenness, silence, and simplicity.

On Easter I unpacked everything and each item became a miraculous and precious gift to me.

Abraham knows abundance, but he lacks something in his relationship with God. It's odd to say because God appears to him in person, so that would seem to be a relationship that one might envy. But, actually, Abraham doesn't accept that his entire life is determined by the desire of God to be fulfilled in him and glorified through him. When the impossible is promised, even though God appears in person and promises it, Abraham finds it hard to believe. Sometimes every possibility has to be cleared away so that the truth can be revealed by virtue of that which remains. That which remains is a promise in which Abraham places his trust, as shown by his subsequent actions. I place my trust in that promise as well. It is the promise that God is in relationship with me and with each of us and will not part from us, no matter our failings, doubts, or forgettings.

Monday, March 13

Ray Welles

Genesis 41:46-57, Mark 3:7-19a

### Why a Rainbow?

Have you noticed God doesn't say much about confessing? But we mortals confess quite a lot, or at least apologize. Even the One we say we follow rarely spoke of confessing. That's the church's favorite subject. Jesus' teaching was primarily about forgiving.

Think about it: When were you last coached or prompted into forgiving? Naturally, Jesus was well aware forgiving is terribly hard. Even His "seventy times seven" doesn't quite say how hard. Still, like God, we must try creating interpersonal "rainbows." Try it! You'll shed a few spiritual pounds, walk with a lighter step and laugh more spontaneously. Isn't that what God's rainbow is about?

We have entire books of Prayers of Confession. I once embarked on a quest for Prayers of Forgiveness. They are precious few. Did we miss the point of Jesus' words from the cross? Was he calling for confession, or modeling the forgiving style we all should be emulating?

An essential skill elders must master as they grow older is becoming competent forgivers. It is the only way to change history. The methodology is available. Few use it.

Consider this prayer left on the body of a dead child by an unknown prisoner in Ravensbrück Concentration Camp:

*O Lord, remember not only...men and women of good will, but also those of ill will. But do not remember... the suffering they inflicted on us; remember the fruits we have bought, thanks to this suffering: our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility, our courage, our generosity, the greatness of heart that has grown out of all this, and when they come to judgment let all [these] fruits ....become their forgiveness.*

The history of Western Civilization would be vastly different had we become as familiar with forgiving as we seem to be with confessing.

Tuesday, March 14

Patty Contaxis

Genesis 42:1-17, Mark 3:19b-35

It was Brianna's sixth birthday, two years into remission, and we were going to spend the day on a long, wild beach in Pt. Reyes. On the drive up, we played a favorite word game. Working through the alphabet, each person took a turn making a sentence using as many words as they could think of starting with their letter.

I had just finished, "Umberto the unicorn undulates on a unicycle under an umbrella." Maura, momentarily stumped by "V," considered her task. Brianna, just six years old, stretched her legs out from her car seat and, with pointed toes, touched the back of Maura's headrest.

"How about 'vivid'?" she prompted.

We drove up over the ridge on our way down to Limantour beach. There was a fire the year Brianna was born that burned down tens of thousands of acres along this ridge and half way down the slopes to the beach. We came up here shortly after the fire. All the scrub had burned away, and most of the trees. These hills were bald, a rolling black carpet punctuated by the occasional charred snag. Six years later, the scrub and grasses had returned, and stands and forests of young conifers had taken hold, covering the ridge and heading down the slopes.

"Resilience," murmured Maura as we drove through this resurrection. The only evidence of the devastation six years ago was the occasional blackened snag rising up from richly textured coastal vegetation.

"What's 'resilience'?" asked Brianna.

Maura told Brianna the story of the fire.

"So these trees are the same age as you," she said.

"Oooh," said Brianna.

"This forest is resilient because it was able to come through a hard thing and heal itself," said Maura.

Brianna considered this.

"That's like me," she said. "Same age and everything."

Wednesday, March 15

Chris McCoy

Genesis 42:18-28, Mark 4:1-20

The story of Noah and the flood is hardly comforting if taken literally. I chose to focus on the pretty image of the rainbow in the sky as a symbol of God's love for us when I first heard the story in Sunday school class. Reflecting on the story today, as a much more pessimistic seventeen year-old, it is hard not to focus on God's wrath in the Noah passage. To be honest, it is alarming that God almost exterminated the entire human race in a flood that covered the Earth. I certainly hesitate in worshiping a God who would do such a thing.

What is the purpose of such a harrowing account? Certainly it teaches us that if we have faith in God we will be saved from death, as Noah was. This, however, is largely beside the point. The Mark passage assigned to me for this devotional made me see the tale of Noah and the ark in a new light. In it, Jesus explains why He always speaks to His followers in parables. The use of metaphor through telling such stories enables a stronger connection and allows for a more concrete understanding of what is trying to be communicated. The flood story is a parable, meant to explain why rainbows appear in the sky, but most importantly the purpose of the story is to tell God's children of His covenant with them, to remind them of His eternal love.

Genesis 42:29-38, Mark 4:21-34

Few places stun me as thoroughly as the lavish waters, dreadfully magnificent sheer rock walls, and the endless play of light and shadow in Yosemite Valley, where my family and I spent the New Year's weekend with our friends. Like all magical portals, the force of the valley transports one to the realm of Spirit, soul and the infinite in lightning speed. I arrive initially with my usual restless, slightly agitated and busy mind. But I know I'm finally, fully here when the interior calm and quiet descend and kindle my soul like the heat of a fire after a long numbing cold. My mind notices the sublime change, and the wandering ends, to listen and watch with rapt attention as if on a single infinitely spacious yet tiny point.

The point, this portal, is always here, of course, below the surface. Yet the noise and clutter of the "real" world conspire to create confusion of it. My shoulders drop, my breathing deepens and I sigh audibly. My mind brims with wellness and empties of itself. I close my eyes to savor the silent pulse of joy more deeply, and once reopened everything appears brighter, more vibrant and focused. I have entered enchantment! I thank God for this moment, this place, and pray that I might experience life, purpose and my path with this abundant shimmering less fleetingly.

I read in this Gospel account some of Jesus' teachings about wisdom. In a world that so unabashedly worships superficiality, I feel forcefully brought home to the cultivation of wisdom in these readings and by our experiences in nature. Wisdom frees the soul to step consciously into its journey in eternity, but with feet planted firmly on the earth. There is no getting around that this is my earthly life and this is the world I find myself in. To advance on my path and evolve spiritually there comes a time when I must face this reckoning and respond to it. This is the most important calling I could possibly aspire to.

Wisdom has the creative power to inspire and animate my time on earth in every moment and every circumstance that presents itself. With wisdom, life is my prayer and response to the ceaseless and urgent dialogue my soul is having with God. Without it I feel lost in endless empty circles, constantly craving some next new thing, a life devoid of meaning and substance. More of a long slow death march than a life. Under the illusion of preservation, selfishness ultimately destroys the soul that harbors it.

Can another moment be squandered? God help us all.

Friday, March 17

Nancy Knop

Genesis 43:1-15, Mark 4:35-41

Mark 4: 35-41 Jesus calms the storm

One summer day friends took us sailing. As we left the Berkeley Marina, a strong wind suddenly came up through the Golden Gate. The sails had to come down fast, with major scrambling to get things under control. I was terrified that we wouldn't make it. I didn't know we'd be on calmer water soon. The disciples on the Sea of Galilee with Jesus must have felt the same way. They didn't know yet that he would calm the storm. Jesus, very human, and exhausted from a day of preaching and teaching, was asleep on a cushion in the stern while the waves were swamping the boats. They had to wake him up to ask for help, and they weren't very nice about it, crying out, "Don't you care?"

Whether the storm rages around us, or inside us, there is help. The storms in my life, that terrifying hour on S. F. Bay as well as much more serious storms, have been calmed by the God in human form in my life. That day it was the sailing skill of my friends, but other days it's the hearts and hands of friends who write kind letters, who give support, who pray. FCCB is a calm harbor where God delivers me to hands that help.

"Peace! Be Still!" Once the sea quieted, Jesus asked, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" I've read this Bible story all my life, but now I hear the story in a new way. "God is all around you in human form. Don't wait until you are desperate to ask for help. You might become angry and say, 'Don't you care?!' Ask God, and allow others to help you through the storm. Their hands are God's hands."

Saturday, March 18

Charles Taylor

Genesis 43:16-34, Mark 5:1-20

I have set my rainbow in the clouds

In the Genesis reading we are in the midst of the Joseph story where Joseph meets his brother Benjamin to his great relief and pleasure. The power of this passage comes from overcoming the estrangement that had been imposed by the unfortunate jealousy that had led to his life journey in Egypt. In the verses from Mark we are reminded of Jesus' healing power.

One of the enduring strengths of the Bible is that it tells of the lives of people in terms that remain familiar today and of God's interaction with their lives. Who has not had an estrangement from a family member? Who has been spared the difficulty of depression or other mental disturbance, or has not known people who are having a particularly difficult time? These stories, though written long ago, are still familiar to us in our own lives. These people are not perfect. They are fully human and have their anxieties, flaws, jealousies, troubles, etc. They have their tasks to do and busy lives. Yet, in the midst of their lives, God is with them healing individuals, relationships, and bringing people together. It is significant that the man Jesus healed wanted to accompany him, but Jesus sent him away to report "what great things the Lord has done for you, and how He had mercy on you."

As we confront trials, both in our own health and in our relationships, it is important to remember that God is on our side and that we need not be afraid. We may not be right, but we also can respond to our challenges from a secure place and share God's love in the process of achieving resolution. Let us daily pray for the reassurance that we are loved and bring that love into the ways that we treat ourselves and those we are in relationship with.

Sunday, March 19

Deidra Jow

Exodus 20:1-17, John 2:13-22

What's love got to do with it?

As I read Exodus 20:1-17, the Ten Commandments, I asked myself, what does this have to do with God's promise to me of unconditional love? I decided to take a step back and put the Ten Commandments into a broader context by reading Exodus 19.

In Exodus 19, Moses is on Mt. Sinai about three months after God had led the Israelites out of Egypt. I love what God tells Moses to tell the people: "Say to the House of Jacob, and tell the sons of Israel: You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you to myself. Now then, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, then you shall be my own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is mine." Exodus 19:4-5

I love you, I brought you out of Egypt, I brought you to myself. How loving this is! How beautiful to be brought to God and not left out in the wilderness wandering.

In my New American Standard Version of the Bible, the words "My own possession" have a footnote that says "special treasure." Don't we all long to be someone's special treasure? Don't we all want to be possessed—in a loving way—by God? I know I want this.

Like the covenant rainbow, God gives the Israelites a promise that is preceded by God's profession of love for the Israelites.

Without the reading of Exodus 19, the Ten Commandments may seem rather dictatorial. But if we step back, and put the Ten Commandments into the context of God's leading the Israelites out of the wilderness and God's profession of love, the Commandments are beautiful.

May we remember the depth, breadth and height of God's love for us.

Monday, March 20

Jennifer Carlson

Genesis 44:18-34, Mark 5:21-43

One of the suggested readings for today is the familiar story of the “unclean” woman who touches the cloak Jesus is wearing, desperately hoping that he can heal her and return her to a life within a community. Without seeing her, Jesus recognizes that she has touched his cloak and he seeks her out in the crowd to reassure her that she is, in fact, well again and can return to her life.

At first, I wondered how this would ever relate to the idea of this year’s theme: “I Set My Rainbow in the Clouds.” But then, I began to realize how awful this woman’s life must have been for the twelve years she was sick. How difficult must her life have been as an “unclean” person, unable to be touched or to touch... She was an outcast living a marginal life. Just by embracing Jesus’ ability to heal her, by believing in his power, she was empowered by Jesus to heal herself by faith.

A rainbow in the clouds is yet another manifestation of God’s hand, given to us as a reminder that faith will see us through the dark clouds of life. We can accept God’s beautiful gift to us and, by believing in it, find the strength we need to heal ourselves.

Clouds are part of the natural cycle of all things, as are sickness and pain. Though they can cause us sadness, God’s hand is within them, and the rainbow He gives us is His tangible sign that He is always with us, seen and unseen.

Tuesday, March 21

Carolyn Ocheltree

Genesis 45:1-15, Mark 6:1-13

### God's Unconditional Love

It's the first week in January 2006. My heart is heavy with sorrow for the grieving families who lost loved ones in the West Virginia coal mine explosion. In the midst of the low-rolling hills, those families gather in a white-frame church to lift up their faith in a loving God who is suffering with them. In the darkest of night with tears flowing, they hold candles of light.

In 2003 my family, which was scattered across the country, gathered in such a church for a family reunion. We chose to meet at the Fairview United Methodist Church outside of Buckhannon, West Virginia. This white-frame church was the church of my great grandfather. He was their first pastor. On that special Sunday we witnessed to the faith of our ancestors—a faith that had been transmitted to us. As we listened to the stories of struggle, sorrow, hope and joy, tears rolled down our faces.

It is this personal experience that draws me so profoundly to the miners' families. I literally can see the narrow roads, the barren trees, the lighted white church. I feel so connected to those families in their struggle to believe in the midst of sorrow.

Our scriptures for today speak of that connectedness we have through faith.

In Genesis we hear of Joseph's reunion with his brothers. Joseph explains that God has been with them throughout their painful separation. His faith prepares Joseph to forgive his brothers so they may be reunited.

In Mark we hear of Jesus and his disciples going out among the villages (the little white-frame churches of the world) to witness that we are all God's children and His love for us is unconditional.

Today may we be empowered to believe more deeply that there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God.

Wednesday, March 22

Milton Fujii

Genesis 45:16-28, Mark 6:13-29

In the lectionary verses for the day I see a contrast between the intricate infallible hand of God in human affairs and the blundering efforts of individuals who seek to usurp God's dominion. Genesis tells how God led a man of great faith, Joseph, through an improbable chain of events so that he would be in a position to save his people from starvation. In Mark, we read of a tyrannical ruler, Herod, who invoked draconian measures in a vain attempt to achieve supremacy over all others, even over God.

Joseph's tortuous path from favorite son to slave to prime minister helps me to believe that all things really do work out for the best for those who love God. God's plan for Joseph involved trials that would shake anyone's faith, yet Joseph never gave up on God and remained true to his values. Even though, in the midst of his hardships, Joseph could not comprehend God's grand design for his life, he always sought to make the most of his circumstances and to honor God and serve others as best he could. Consequently, Joseph not only survived but thrived and was able to fulfill his destined role as rescuer of his family and his nation.

The story of Herod and his brutal campaign to prevent the rise of a perceived rival, Jesus, illustrates how no amount of human scheming, manipulation or brute force can subvert God's will. Herod thought that it was within his power to suppress the influence of Jesus and John the Baptist, but it is comforting to know that even such an obsessive and oppressive force of evil as Herod is no match for God's guiding hand and the love of those who are faithful to God.

Thursday, March 23

Shelly Dieterle

Genesis 46:1-7, 28-34, Mark 6:30-46

The Mark passage is a well-read miracle story, speaking to us of abundance through "Feeding the Five Thousand." In this reading I have found something new, or rather, a part of the story I easily gloss over on my eager jump to abundance.

"Many were coming and going . . . He had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd..."

Why were people coming and going? What did Jesus have to offer them?

I often think of compassion as a sweet and loving act, no ruffled feathers but rather calm and peaceful comfort and care. However, looking at the Greek word for compassion that describes Jesus' ministry, we learn that compassionate acts are deeply moving and gut wrenching. Compassion is the willingness to be torn open by the needs and the hunger of those around us. Even though people were constantly coming and going, seeking Jesus at all hours of every day, Jesus' response was compassion. Jesus' response to all the commotion, all the coming and going, was not to withdraw and detach! Jesus' response was to move toward the need, to respond to the hunger, to speak words of love and compassion to those who were coming and going in search of a deeper life, a stronger love, and a meaningful connection. Jesus was willing to live not unto himself, but for the good of others in community, and he charged his disciples to do the same when they said, "...send them away so that they may go to the surrounding country and village and buy something for themselves to eat."

In two days, ten FCCBers and ten Cal students will embark on a powerful journey to New Orleans. We will likely face challenges similar to the disciples on that day when they wanted to send all the people away and find some personal solace. Our challenge will be to turn to one another in this intense experience of community and to keep our hearts open for the deep movement that will pour through us over and over again. Please pray for us and for the people of New Orleans who are coming and going, not quite sure where home is, who their community is or where God is present amid their struggles. May we be the hands, feet, eyes and heart of Christ. Together, we may just experience the abundance that soon surrounded the "five thousand."

Friday, March 24

Brianna Grace Contaxis Tucker

Genesis 47:1-26, Mark 6:47-56

My Rainbows

*I have set my rainbow in the clouds*

*My goals are ahead of me*

*I can save*

*I can love*

*I am strong and powerful*

*I create peace and stop war*

*I can go on*

*I create colors in the rainbow*

*I puff the clouds*

*I blow the wind*

*Thrusting through my trees*

*I rock*

*The waves*

*Carrying the ark*

*I am the moon*

*I am the sun*

*I am the savior with you*

Saturday, March 25

Stacy Nelson

Genesis 47:27–48:7, Mark 7:1-23

“You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God, in order to keep your tradition!”-Jesus

Every day we seek to uphold rituals that will provide us with lives that feel stable and whole. We have rituals for bathing, grooming, exercise, how time with loved-ones is spent, mealtimes, work, and bedtime. These rituals hold together our concepts of who we are and what we value. When something occurs that derails our expectations for that day, our sense of power and illusion of control is threatened. Was the day really ours, invariable and guaranteed?

How many times have missed flights, burnt casseroles, surprising snowstorms, or friends' urgent needs made way for a glorious surprise that we could not have planned, nor predicted? The faith that's required to wait for that latent bloom is the same faith that we need to invite, or instigate a spontaneous act of love (the Bible speaks of it as obedience) that might be, at first thought, a disturbance in our day.

I've learned that maintaining edifying rituals, like flossing my teeth every night, improves my self-image and gives me some peace and a sense that I can trust myself with my own life. I am beginning to learn that it can be even more gratifying and stabilizing to roll with a disruption in my agenda and make it into an opportunity to show love.

Let us consider two questions:

What do the acts that fill the hours of our days, those rituals that link together to spell the stories of our lives say about who we are and how we want the world to be?

Are we loose or trusting enough to accept the opportunities to grow and give that are, by nature, interruptions of our rituals?

Sunday, March 26

Chris Bucholtz

Numbers 21:4-9, John 3:14-21

It was a cold autumn, and I was living alone in a cold house. My marriage had unraveled suddenly and without warning, and the woman I had been building a life with had simply left and moved across the country. Although I understood her reasons, I still felt shocked, victimized and adrift. Add to that the fact that my job barely kept me afloat financially and it was looking like a bleak winter indeed.

I was loath to ask for help, but I eventually screwed up my courage to ask an old friend for help. I felt humiliated by my circumstances and the last thing I wanted to do was explain my dire straits to someone who, when she'd last seen me, believed I was on my way to success in every facet of life. Still, I made the call, and instead of the pity or blame I expected I received nothing but support. She was a whiz at tailoring resumes, and her help gave me confidence that I'd soon have my career back on track. When we met again in person and started dating, I knew that I had found someone whose great love would right the other parts of my life that had seemed utterly upended. Of course, I'm talking about Elizabeth Driver, my wife, whose life had taken a very different path from mine. However, it was clear that regardless of what mistakes I had made, or what errant turns my life had taken, love and redemption were waiting if only I was courageous enough to see them.

An obscure pop song from the obscure band LMNOP includes the line, "everybody cares about you, if you only want them to." Pride and a fear of rejection often cause us to shun the help and love of others even when we most desperately need them. We thrive when we are open to see the love that others have to give, and when we are able to recognize when others need the love we have to offer.

Monday, March 27

Janet Eadie

Genesis 49:1-28, Mark 7:24-37

Perhaps I should start by confessing that I am not a patient person. Truthfully, beneath my calm demeanor lurks a frequently irritated individual. I ask myself questions such as, "Why does anyone feel that it's necessary to occupy two or three seats on BART, forcing others to ask them to 'pretty-please' move their belongings so they can sit down, too?" And, "Couldn't that doofus in front of me start digging for her checkbook before the clerk finished totaling up her purchases?"

Seemingly petty annoyances bug the dickens out of me. Yet, it's Lent, the season of penitential reflection, and I don't always like what I see when I examine my own behavior. Not that I'm admitting that my expectations are sometimes unreasonable, but I am acknowledging that my getting in a snit about other people's thoughtlessness doesn't do anyone any good. Which begs the question, what am I going to do about it? I considered denying myself chocolate or coffee during Lent to see if that led to inner peace and tranquility, but, let's face it, the lack of chocolate or coffee would not help this endeavor in the least!

Maya Angelou once said, "Know that you all have the privilege of becoming a rainbow in the clouds." So, for my Lenten discipline, I'm going to try to be a rainbow instead of a cranky cloud. It's a simple idea, and it's probably not going to make a noticeable difference in the world or even in someone else's life, but maybe it will change my life, and maybe that's a start.

From "A Brave and Startling Truth," written by Maya Angelou in honor of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the United Nations:

*When we come to it*

*We, this people, on this wayward, floating body*

*Created on this earth, of this earth*

*Have the power to fashion for this earth*

*A climate where every man and every woman*

*Can live freely without sanctimonious piety*

*Without crippling fear*

*When we come to it*

*We must confess that we are the possible*

*We are the miraculous, the true wonder of this world*

*That is when, and only when*

*We come to it.*

Tuesday, March 28

Marijke Fakasiieiki

Genesis 49:29–50:14, Mark 8:1-10

### My Grandmother's Legacy

While drinking a cup of tea from my grandmother's china set, I was mulling over the texts for March 28, 2006 for our Lenten Booklet. Perhaps, like my grandmother's life and tea set, these two stories point to the legacy of human life, and God's covenant. Joseph's legacy arose from being sold into slavery in Egypt, redemption as a dream interpreter, and offering hospitality to his family during the famine in spite of their previous betrayal.

Jesus' miracle feeding of the five thousand opened people up to God's covenant. Jesus' legacy was reflected in his actions: healing people, comforting the suffering, challenging the status quo, calling for justice. They were actions that matched his words that God loves us in a deep and abiding way.

My grandmother's legacy was not the tea set, although it reminds me of her life: a surface painted with colorful flowers, ruffled edges, offering hospitality and holding remedies for life's trials. She was independent and stubborn. An encounter with the divine as a young adult challenged her to act on behalf of others. An Episcopalian, she married a Methodist minister. Their common vision for a community, where God unites, took them to the first World Council of Churches Assembly in Amsterdam, Holland in 1948, and then on a Church World Service tour of European refugee camps. Stories of their trips challenged their faith communities to expand their visions. They invited Martin Niemoeller and civil rights leaders to stay in their home, with their four children. My grandmother worked with United Methodist Women in New York to vote Senator Joe McCarthy out of office. As state president of Church Women United in Oregon, she worked for peace and justice in Central America and hosted refugees from South East Asia. In later years, she served on missions committees and was newsletter editor for First Congregational Church of Eugene. Her legacy—not only of her life, but of offering hospitality at her island cottage—challenges me to be a reflection of the rainbow sign in the clouds.

Wednesday, March 29

Dave Sutton

Genesis 50:15-26, Mark 8:11-26

Both of today's scripture readings remind us of the power of God and how difficult it is for some to see.

In the Genesis reading it was so hard for Joseph's brothers to believe that he was not going to be revengeful for their actions. All they could focus on was how they had first thought (and tried) to kill him, and then did sell him as a slave. They could not understand that God had been good to Joseph. They, as we today, had difficulty accepting the "good news"—believing that God has the power to move people in directions not understood by their today-focused and experience-limited culture.

In Mark the Pharisees asked for a sign of God's power, and Jesus was frustrated that they were so blind to the truth. Likewise Jesus' impatience with the disciples' inability to see the lessons of not only feeding the multitudes from the few loaves of bread, but actually having lots of bread left over.

In the blackest emotional time of my life, when I was facing impossible challenges seemingly at every turn, I knew the most difficult confrontation of all lay squarely ahead, even though I couldn't name it or see its image. It was a painful blackness waiting in a closet in my bedroom, which I knew I must enter. I felt powerless and afraid to face it, yet there was simply no alternative and the time was tonight. That night the spirit of Jesus appeared to me, saying "I'll go there for you." I was powerless to do anything but accept this incredible, unbelievable gift, just as Joseph's brothers shamed by my personal failing, but marveling and so grateful at the power of God in this form. It came not because I deserved it, not because I believed, but because my need was so great.

My prayer is that we can all accept God's strength when we face the inevitable trials of our life.

Thursday, March 30

Nancy Alexander

Exodus 1:6-22, Mark 8:27-9:1

"But the Midwives feared God; they did not do as the King of Egypt commanded, but they let the boys live."

This reading tells part of the Exodus story, a part that I had never heard. It captures my imagination because of the quiet strength of the midwives. They defied the Pharaoh. They did not do it loudly. They did not do it directly. Rather, they were subversive and the boys lived. It makes me think of quiet acts of kindness and civil disobedience. I believe that when we see God in and through each other we too will have the quiet strength of a Hebrew midwife. We will fight injustice and go out of our way to help those most vulnerable.

The reading from Mark tells us to be willing to sacrifice for our convictions. I wonder what the Hebrew midwives risked for theirs. Did they risk their lives? I have never risked losing my comfort, my personal safety or that of my family, and living in middle-class America. It is unlikely I will ever be asked to make such a sacrifice. But if ever I am, I pray I will have the strength of the quiet Hebrew midwife.

Friday, March 31

Alexa Maremaa

Exodus 2:1-22, Mark 9:2-13

Moses and the burning bush. Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain. Many recognize these as signs of God's presence, unmistakable instances of the divine; we know there is something magnificent and sacred to it. We often demand signs from God as ways to shake our unbelief, asking for reminders of God's unconditional relationship with us. But in life rarely do these involve floating in glistening garments above the ground. Faith leans towards the subtle and intangible.

What are the subtle signs then? How do we embrace the light when all we see is darkness, questioning whether God is even there? How do we envision an illusive rainbow when rain is clouding our eyes? The godliness, the sign, is in that which lifts us out of our difficult conditions. In times of hardship there are always those who can take us beyond what we see and instead show us God. A mark of godliness is in each of us when we raise each other up—this action reinforces God's bond in us and between us.

The extravagant Christmas decorations my neighbors create to delight their children stand out against a decrepit Los Angeles apartment. My mom, who fills my life with too much love for me to remember I am missing a father. Jazz, which takes me away from troubles in a sacred exchange of notes—ear—spirit. Big Bob, who blazed a spiritual path for all of us, illuminating the way for our community to follow.

Make a list of these in your life. They are vast, they are sweet, they are God. May we remember to appreciate the subtle signs until they become extravagant, so obvious to us that we don't need to see them anymore to know they are there. Seeing God in the little things is the sign this Lenten season; and so God's presence is tangible, the rainbow not so illusive.

Saturday, April 1

Nancy Rader

Exodus 2:23–3:15, Mark 9:14-29

Though a granddaughter and grandniece of preachers, missionaries, and a prominent radio evangelist of the 1930's, I was not raised in any religion, and was baptized at FCCB just two years ago. So the text of the Bible is still very new to me.

Like many who come to FCCB, I had first to get past my distaste of the predominant face of Christianity in the U.S. today (indeed, during many sad chapters of world history)—the intolerant, hateful, greedy likes of the former head of the Christian Coalition who, in putting his skills to work for the corporate world, is now caught up in political scandal.

And so, in reflecting on the lectionary passages for this day, I am glad to find once again meanings that are overwhelmingly at odds with the brand of Christianity that finds itself with so much political power today. As Marcus Borg explains in *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time* (in my case, the very first time), to understand the Exodus story is to understand the world of Egypt, and ancient agrarian empires generally—a world where economic exploitation, political oppression, and religious legitimization were required to keep two-thirds of agrarian wealth in the hands of the ruling elites. The story of Exodus “is the story of radical protest against and liberation from such a world, and it affirms that radical criticism of and liberation from such societies is the will of God.”

I take the passage from Mark, in which Jesus orders the demons out of a boy, as a story of Jesus bringing enlightenment to a dark world. Jesus is Christianity's example of a human life filled with God's spirit. Jesus gave his life in radical protest to the powers of his time.

Sunday, April 2

John Rowe

Jeremiah 31:31-34, John 12:20-33

What We Are Made Of

*What does it mean  
when river dam*

*can hold back  
no more?*

*What are we made of:  
puddles, pools, new lakes?*

*We are deep within  
what we are made of*

*Then rain breaks for awhile  
Sun makes mirror reflection*

*from new bodies  
back to ourselves*

*What are we made of?*

*We are made up of  
all we can perceive*

*Emotion is water  
New waters flow through us*

*Change is the next moment  
under sun or rain*

*Bend your own rainbow  
Touch the colors*

*running through you  
with your healing hands*

Monday, April 3

Robert Bradley

Exodus 4:10-31, Mark 9:30-41

My lack of religious background may have determined my inability to respond to the scripture verses, and my reliving of the 60's in the theme. I believe that God has spoken to Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, and every other leader of the world's great religions.

I was at a loss as to what to say for this date in the Lenten book until I received a Christmas email from a friend who lives in Hanoi and distributes birth control/AIDS information to NGO's in the world's poorest countries like Bangladesh and East Timor. This woman doesn't talk or write about living a godly life...she lives it! Her Christmas email is forwarded from her colleague in Pakistan, Mr. Abdul Haye, and succinctly states thoughts that I aspire to, but so often fall short of:

*May we all be blessed with the eternal light that Musa (Moses— peace be upon him) received and still reflects; with eternal love that Isa (Christ—peace be upon him) contained and continuously transmits; the Divine Wisdom, Grace and Compassion that Muhammad (peace be upon him) has eternally and constantly been showering on the universe; and with the true feeling of oneness of humanity that all the prophets, Gurus and spiritual teachers have talked about. May the New Year be a door to better, uplifted and more contented times ahead for your inner and outer life. May we all be touched and transformed by the power of the soul within.*

Tuesday, April 4

Nancy McKay

Exodus 5:1–6:1, Mark 9:42-50

“Getting Attention”

“Mom?”

“I’m on the phone, dear.”

“But Mom, this is really, really, reeaally important.”

“If your hand leads you into sin, cut it off!”

What? Does that sound like Jesus? I wish that teaching was not in the gospels (three of them!).

He does get our attention. This must be really, really important. In some situations Jesus uses hyperbole. This is hyper hyperbole! It should carry the disclaimer, “Do not try this at home!”

This scripture makes me ask, just what does Jesus want for us?

Quality, really high quality in our relationship with God. A healthy spirituality. Therefore, cut out anything that isn’t healthy for that bond.

When I had metastatic melanoma 12 years ago, it was a no-brainer to cut out the cancerous lymph nodes. I wanted high quality life. I wanted health. I wanted well-being and long life. I wanted to see grandchildren. I wanted to continue my call to ministry. I wanted my relationship with God to grow...right here on earth. I remember being in shock and turmoil trying to go to sleep the night of the diagnosis. I tried to pray, again. I heard in my heart, “Come unto me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest.” A sense of peace filled me and I did sleep. Later, in the morning I did a double-take. “What kind of rest? Eternal? No thanks, not yet. Okay?”

My life since that time has been one of increasing closeness with Jesus and with Sophia (Wisdom). Closeness and also pruning. I have been pruned by the gardener of both habits and attitudes. And I have never been cut off. That is the Gospel promise. We shall never be cut off. We belong and are growing.

Prayer

Thank you for all the ways you get my attention. Thank you for the care that grows my life, that nurtures my spirit. Amen.

Wednesday, April 5

Exodus 7:8-24, Mark 10:1-16

Just Now

*In the morning as the storm begins to blow away  
the clear sky appears for a moment and it seems to me  
that there has been something simpler than I could ever believe  
simpler than I could have begun to find words for  
not patient not even waiting no more hidden  
than the air itself that became part of me for a while  
with every breath and remained with me unnoticed  
something that was here unnamed unknown in the days  
and the nights not separate from them  
not separate from them as they came and were gone  
it must have been here neither early nor late then  
by what name can I address it now holding out my thanks*

W.S. Merwin

Thursday, April 6

Carol Ingram

Exodus 7:25–8:19, Mark 10:17-31

In Mark we read a story of a stranger who we learn is a man of great wealth. The stranger wants to know what he should do to obtain “eternal life.” He obeys the commandments, “do not murder,” “do not steal,” etc. Jesus responds, his heart warmed to the stranger, that he should sell all that he has, and to give to the poor, to follow him. To do the will of God is to love God, and to love your neighbor.

The point is not simply that we should write our generous checks to our favorite charities and donate food to the food bank and belongings to the Thrift Shop. We are called to have an attitude of generosity every day, in everything we do, to see God in our “neighbor.” That includes having a loving attitude towards the person who cut you off on the freeway, towards the co-worker who may irritate, even towards those who vote differently from you. Focus on loving God, who is in all people and in all things. Trust that by loving God and all of your neighbors you will be doing God’s will.

From Mother Teresa:

*People are often unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered; forgive them anyway. If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives; be kind anyway. If you are successful, you will win some false friends and some true friends; succeed anyway. If you are honest and frank, people may cheat you; be honest and frank anyway. What you spend years building, someone could destroy overnight; build anyway. If you find serenity and happiness, they may be jealous; be happy anyway. The good you do today, people will often forget tomorrow; do good anyway. Give the world your best anyway. You see, in the final analysis, it is between you and God; it was never between you and them anyway.*

Exodus 9:13-25, Mark 10:32-45

The “rainbow in the clouds” is a vision of a promise, a covenant between God and His people. The verses also speak of promise and fulfillment. In the Exodus passage, God unleashes the hail plague as an inducement to get the pharaoh to release the Jews. This was God’s promise to Moses to get them to the Promised Land. The reading from Mark starts with the third prophecy of Jesus’ death on the cross. In the middle of the reading, two disciples ask that Jesus allow them to have the favored seat at His table in glory. But Jesus tells them that “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life for the ransom of many.”

Too often, when we think of a promise, we focus on the fulfillment of the promise. This misses the beauty and grandeur of a rainbow just to chase after the pot of gold at the end. But the pot of gold gets further and further away as we chase it. As parents, we don’t want our children to remember only their twenty first birthday and not their childhood and lessons of their life so far.

How often do we focus on the death of Christ on the cross and forget his path and his teaching? We forget the message and only remember the symbol. The lessons, the example, and the hope is what the Passion is about, not the broken figure on Golgotha.

So perhaps the promise of the rainbow is a path and a journey, hopefully not 40 years in the wilderness. We can also look on the Lenten devotional as a journey in the season of Lent following the promise of Jesus.

Saturday, April 8

Gracy Huntley

Exodus 10:21–11:8, Mark 10:46-52

When the Lord heals Bartimaeus he says, "Go, your faith has made you well." The Israelites, who lived under Pharaoh's oppression for more than four hundred years waiting, were sustained by hope and faith. Today's disasters, on a national scale and those that happen within our homes, seem abundant. We must have faith and hope of the magnitude of Bartimaeus, Moses, and all of the Israelites. I want to have a living faith and hope that never runs out. I want to be able to share my love, hope, and faith with fellow human beings. These things are only possible via my relationship with our creator God.

### My Covenant With God

*God, the force that calms the water of our hearts,  
The Rainbow above the clouds of trials,  
The Spark and power behind creation,  
A cool breeze bringing refreshment and faith.*

*Holy One, your care extends to all of creation,  
All humans old and young, strong and weak, rich and poor,  
Everything is united in you, you who calmed the waters.*

*Blessed Savior, the superior being that gives us hope,  
That we may abide with you, finding peace and love within our hearts,  
You who blow through all people offering fullness in spirit.*

*God, as your children we have to love in return,  
Pray and listen to your calls in faith, hope, peace, and love,  
And even when the storm is violent, you will calm the waters of our hearts, and we will see your rainbow: we will know you.*

*Amen*

Isaiah 50:4-9a, John 12:12-16

The Vine

*"I am the vine, you are the branches." (John 15:5)*

*The vine looks brown, dry, lifeless.  
Unseen roots sip moisture from cold grey storms.  
The Vinedresser gently prunes and shapes  
and waits.  
The sunlight and warmth of springtime  
stir the sleeping essence of the vine.  
A trickle  
of living water  
begins to flow.  
Tender green leaflets can be restrained no longer.  
They burst joyously into the light.  
A coursing brook flows  
into unfurling pennants of green and gold.  
All is wet and alive and green and growing.*

Monday, April 10

Hanneke Jansen

Isaiah 42:1-9, John 12:1-11

Someone said "I wish God gave me such clear signs as He's giving you."

This was the summer of 1997. The decision to move from Sweden, which was an adopted country already, to California was not one to make hastily. I carried the questions, uncertainties, sadness about leaving friends, and excitement about new opportunities in my heart for quite some time. One Saturday morning I was running errands and walked by a gift shop. There were little butterfly-shaped candles on sale. I immediately thought that those would be the perfect gift for the friends I'd leave behind IF I decided to move to California. The price was right and while I hadn't made my decision on moving, I figured I should buy the whole basket of candles "just in case." I could always use them as Christmas gifts.

After running my errands, I had to stop at the lab to finish some work. I parked my car and walked to the building. From the darkness of the entryway a butterfly appeared. He landed right on my heart, sat there for a few seconds and then flew out into the sunshine.

The poem I wrote to accompany the candle-gifts is below. The choice to move to California was right for me. As to God being abundant in the signs He provides: He is! It is up to us to notice and pay attention.

*recognize and receive  
joy  
never everlasting  
but always near  
to be recognized and received*

*in the vibrations of drum  
in the crisp winter night  
the expectations of spring  
and the fire of autumn  
in the passing of a butterfly*

*whose wings once were  
the palette of our Creator  
and now reflect  
the late summer sun  
touching our hearts in passing*

Tuesday, April 11

Carmelle Knudsen

Isaiah 49:1-7, John 12:20-36

*Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light.*

How often have I insisted on walking in the darkness?! Why would I want to walk in the darkness? Don't ask me such a rational question. I just know that my own pig-headedness has meant that often I've walked in the darkness. In this passage, we are told to walk while we have the light. The light is love, truth, and wholeness, the Holy Spirit. The audacity of thinking that my truth was THE truth, that the way I saw life was the correct way of seeing life; or I mistook my opinion for fact. Those "character flaws" have forced me to walk in darkness. But John states very poetically that if I had focused on the light, I could have avoided the darkness. Alas, it isn't just putting others first, but being focused, trusting, and believing in the Holy Spirit. When I let the Holy Spirit guide me, then I don't have to walk in the darkness, wondering where am I going, how am I going to get there, will I know when I get there and all the other questions that keep me from being effective.

P.S. I've discovered that there are no rainbows in the dark.

Prayer: Oh loving God, You are the light of our lives. May your Spirit imbue us with a new vision full of light for this hurting world. May we keep focused on you and your light so that we may become children of the light, so that all your children can have a glimpse of the rainbow. Amen

Isaiah 50:4-9a, John 13:21-32

A Few Small Fishes

To me, the five and one-half lines of the Old Testament lectionary for today and Palm Sunday seem pretty much whistling in the dark. They include text clearly echoed in the New Testament: "I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair: I hid not my face from shame and spitting." I suppose N.T. references to Isaiah may be—at least in part—intended to validate the Gospel message. It's interesting that they aren't relevant to the other text for the day. This part of Isaiah is excluded from "The Bible Designed to be read as Living Literature"!

In contrast to Isaiah, John's story of the Last Supper is long ex post facto, somewhat incoherent. It is strange that in spite of the clear inquiry of Peter and "the disciple whom Jesus loved" and Jesus' seemingly clear answer, Judas Iscariot is not immediately recognized by all as the betrayer. Perhaps Jesus was giving morsels of bread dipped in wine (more concisely: sops) to others besides Judas. Note, in passing, the Gospel includes two precedents for communion: serving the elements together, by intinction, as well as separately.

I end by noting that in James Stephen's *Crock of Gold*, the philosopher's wife is trying to tell him that leprechauns are holding the children for ransom but can't because he insists on explaining at length the great soporific merit of church services.

Maundy Thursday, April 13

Charlotte Russell

Exodus 12:1-14, John 13:1-17, 31b-35

“I have set my rainbow in the clouds” (Genesis 9:13)

“I have set you an example: you are to do as I have done for you. If you know this, happy are you if you act upon it.” The feel of the spring sun on my back is one of the most delicious feelings of life. It melts away the tension I carry in my shoulders, assuring me that I am held in the great life-giving power of divine love. Imagine how Mr. and Mrs. Noah felt after spending forty days and nights below deck with all those animals as they stepped out onto the deck, feeling the intense sun on their backs.

I know they were feeling the sun on their back because that is the only way they could have seen the rainbow—which was reflecting back to them the spectrum of the sunlight, symbolizing the promise of God’s faithful, sustaining presence. I wonder if on that final evening with his disciples, Jesus remembered God’s rainbow promise to sustain him through the devastatingly destructive night that lay ahead? Did he trust that he was held in the eternal life of God, even in his hour of betrayal? What did he need from Peter and the others? Strangely, not assurance or comfort.

What he needed from his disciples was for them to let go of their pride and let him come closer to them than they had ever allowed him to do before. The mystery of Maundy Thursday, like the mystery of the rainbow, refracts divine love, revealing the spectrum of God’s love for each one in our world so that we can see it, feel its warm source on our stiff shoulders, and on our tired feet. As this love acts upon us this day, so may we become a community of rainbow promise, letting divine love come close to us so that we may act with uncomplicated kindness to others, and be a warm, visual delight in the world.

Isaiah 52:13–53:12, John 18:1–19:42

I'll admit at the start that the whole season of Lent has long confused me. It has always seemed like such a juxtaposition of opposites. From giving something up during Lent to the big Easter dinner celebration, there were always jarring opposites. Should I be sad during Lent and suddenly happy on Easter? Exactly what was happening during those six weeks of Lent? As a kid, the church I attended was more focused on Palm Sunday and Easter than the six weeks of preparation that are Lent. Even Good Friday sort of got scant attention being observed with a fairly solemn service that was hard to sit through. So I have always wondered what's so good about Good Friday? Even as an adult, the only good I could see in Good Friday was that Lent was almost over. There seems to be such opposites in a day where the reality is that Good Friday always feels like a solemn day of remembrance instead of anything joyful or good. In a historical context, the day has always been the anniversary of the Crucifixion. Celebrating the anniversary of a Crucifixion? None of this makes much sense to me.

Maybe it is in that juxtaposition of opposites where I can find the good in Good Friday. Yes, it is a day where we read the prophetic voices from Isaiah and the Crucifixion story from John's Gospel. But it also is a day of hope because I know that, in a short time, I will gather with everyone at church to celebrate the resurrection over the grave. Like so many paradoxes of my faith, Lent and Good Friday offer me a time for reflection and finding within myself the meaning of the season.

Job 14:1-14, John 19:38-42

Recently, on the last day of the ferocious storms which battered Northern California, we were traveling north on I-5 while the storm was moving south. Rain pelted the car so hard it was difficult to see at times, and a strong wind buffeted it. But ahead there was a break in the clouds and a lovely rainbow beckoned us onward. That rainbow stayed ahead of us for nearly two hours, leading us into the light of a new, beautiful, rain washed world.

As I read the scripture for today, I felt such sadness at the despair felt by Job, Mary Magdalene, Peter and the other disciples. Rarely have I felt so emotionally connected to a Biblical story. I thought about the darkest days of my own life, losing two of our children, and like Job wondering how to go on. Those companions of Jesus who had seen the events of the previous day, who knew the scriptural promises and Jesus' own words to them, still felt the darkness and could not see the rainbow of God's promise. Yet today we know that on the next day there was incredible joy. Jesus arose, and the world was filled with brightness and the promise of new life.

My mind went back to that ride north, following the rainbow. The darkness of the day, the wildness of the storm, must have been like the bleakness and despair those long ago people felt in their souls. It certainly was how I felt at the deaths of our children. But God had given the promise of a brighter day, a new covenant, upholding them and us as we are led out of our own sadness and despair. We just need to look up and see the rainbow.

A prayer:

Creator God, Lead us out of this dark day, as we remember the despair and hopelessness of the people after the crucifixion and burial. Let us remember the rainbow you have set before us, the promise you have given us in the life of Jesus. Be with hurting people everywhere, ease their pain, and let them see that beautiful rainbow You have given us.

Let it be so, Amen

Isaiah 25:6-9, John 20:1-18

Though these witnesses to the resurrection lived in an entirely different world than ours, they possessed the same deeply human desires of joy and sorrow. In John's unique story of "the morning after," Mary is held between those two emotions as if she were suspended on a tightrope over a canyon. One moment she is weeping for her dead friend; the next she is swept away by the ordinary ecstasy of being alive. The writer captures in a few sentences our own sojourn through the rough terrain of human experience. We move through bits and pieces of grief and sorrow each day. And each day, if we open our eyes, we can be called into the freshness of life and new possibilities.

This day, Easter calls us into rejoicing and celebration. Even if it floods and there are blustering winds, we get to celebrate life made new all over again. Even if we are grieving the loss of a beloved one or feeling the ache of old age, our broken hearts are on the mend. Even if the war in Iraq rages on and there is no end to homelessness, poverty and oppression, we are alive to receive the gift of God's grace today—it will give us "strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow." On Easter morning, like Mary at the tomb, we see the rainbow of resurrection—hope through the shimmer of our tears.

John's story of the conversation at the tomb tells the story that life does not flow from a dead savior, but from the community that sustains life—giving power in the midst of broken heartedness. I pray that we will continue to live courageously and hopefully as a community of seekers of the risen Christ. In the words of Rita Nakashima Brock, "Guided by heart, we must travel with each other and remember all who have gone before."

May this new day be brilliant for you and may God's love shine in the coldest of hearts and the dullest of minds, holding out for new hope for all God's people.

Alleluia! Christ is risen.

*God of rainbow, fiery pillar,  
leading where the eagles soar,  
We your people,  
ours the journey  
now and ever, now and ever,  
now and evermore.*

*"In the Midst of New Dimensions"  
The New Century Hymnal*