

Along the Way

2016 Lenten Devotional



HIGHLAND
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
Sharing Hope from the Heart of the Highlands

2016 Lenten Devotional: Along the Way

Highland Presbyterian Church members and friends write a devotional book each year for Lent. It is a beautiful practice for the church reflect on faith in the season of Lent. This year the theme is "Along the Way." In so many ways our lives can be understood as journeys or pilgrimages. Throughout life, there are many *stops along the way*. During different stages of life and at different ages, our experiences reveal to us new understandings of our faith and new meanings of God's presence in our lives. Through life's various transitions certain experiences open us to new ways of knowing faith. We experience challenges. Important relationships, transitions and sacrifices are made. Our experiences bring us to ask faithful questions, discover sacred places, and seek God in prayers, hymns, and songs. The devotions that follow are gifts offered to us for the season of Lent. They come from hearts and minds and experiences of Highland Presbyterian's faith community so that we might discover again the ways we live our faith through life's many changes and turns. May you know God's endless love and may you experience the fullness of God's grace this Lent; and may this devotional be a resource for you along the way to Easter.

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February 10 | Sacrifice | Viola Randall

Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. – John 3:17

My favorite place on earth is a bench at the bottom of the spillway on Lake Susan at Montreat. I was sitting on that bench a couple of years ago when I got a message one of my former students, Josh, had been shot and killed. I sat there and wept for Josh, prayed for his family, and asked God why so many young people must die in such a violent way. What was it this time? Gangs? Drugs? Later that day, I found and read the news article that explained Josh was killed trying to keep his sister safe from a former relationship. He sacrificed himself for his sister. I judged the circumstances of Josh's death based on what I knew had happened to so many others before I knew the facts. Today's scripture reminds us, God sent Jesus into this world to save world without judgment.

Prayer—God, please help us to be more like Jesus in every way. Please help us to accept all without judgment.

February 11 | Challenges | Lynn March

He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken. Psalm 62:6

I was sitting and thinking on a cliff overlooking the Pacific Ocean outside the art colony of Mendocino, California. I had had a peak religious experience earlier that year. I worried that it would change my life and affect my family negatively. I had an appointment with Abrigo, a silversmith. I wanted him to make me a cross I had designed, one somewhat asymmetrical (like me) and with a hint of the thorns from Jesus' crown. As I watched a fragile sea plant, pounded by the coastal waves, and clinging to a boulder, I wondered when the waves would break it loose and if my new belief in God's reality would last. Two weeks later I returned to pick up my cross and to find that the plant was still attached. It was a sign for me that my faith would withstand the tempests of life's oceans.

Prayer—Holy God, surround us with your powerful presence, your amazing grace, that we can grow rooted in faith.

February 12 | Transitions | Lee Hinson-Hasty

Then the LORD came and stood there, calling just as before, "Samuel, Samuel!" Samuel said, "Speak. Your servant is listening." – 1 Samuel 3:10

Samuel is understood in Hebrew to mean, *Heard of God*. Samuel, however, had to learn to *hear* God first. Three times in the night God calls out to Samuel, and he does not recognize the voice of the divine. Instead, he mistakes Eli for God (1 Sam. 3:1-9). Only after Eli's instruction does Samuel open himself to listen for God's call. Samuel heard God and went on to challenge his mentor, Eli, and call out others on behalf of God.

Do we hear when God calls us? I wonder who helps us to understand when God is calling out to us? When we do listen to God's intention and guidance, are we ready to follow when we are called to challenge the status quo?

Allan Boesak, anti-apartheid South-African theologian, says God raises those "who have heard God's voice in the cries of the oppressed... and step into the world to challenge the powers of evil." What cries from those oppressed have you heard lately? Maybe you heard the voice of God and it is time to wake up and start listening. Samuel's call seems personal only. Samuel will go on to give a wake-up call of God to his faith community. Maybe yours will too.

Prayer—Speak, God, your servant is listening through the voices of those oppressed. Amen.

February 13 | Faithful Questions | Laurie Kraus

Then God said, 'come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground. – Exodus 3:5.

This invitation come to Moses as he wonders and watches the burning bush, during a time in his life where he has wandered far from his roots and his family. No longer a prince of Egypt, or a miraculously saved child of Israelite slaves, he is hiding in the desert of Midian, keeping sheep. His passion for saving his enslaved people was expressed in an act of violence that forced him to flee for his life, and now he is wandering, lost.

How many times in our lives does a change beyond our control shake our confidence? A death in the family, an unexpected job loss, a change in health or financial well being unmoors us from our life purpose, and leaves us wandering (at least metaphorically!) in a wilderness where nothing seems clear and God seems absent. What does it mean to hear a voice say, "take off your shoes, this is holy ground" when nothing about life seems holy in such hard moments?

Our Jewish brothers and sisters have an alternative translation, a *midrash*, or interpretative reading of these words. They suggest that "take off your shoes" can be translated, "change your habits", or "turn another way." Sometimes, when we are lost in our lives, longing for God to step in, we feel that "stuck" is a place we need to escape. We are waiting for direction when what we need to do is stop, and pay attention, spiritually, to where we are. We are being invited to be present to our confusion, aimlessness and anxiety, and then, to release those fears (change our habits), so that a way forward can emerge for us. In Lent especially, being in the wilderness is not to be feared, but acknowledged and embraced, for it is also a holy place. From here, from this place of burning and mystery, the question, "what next?" opens a new way for God to enter our lives so that we may begin again.

Prayer—When we are waiting, God, enter our lives so that we may begin again anew. Amen.

February 14 | Sacred Places | Doodle Harris

Sailing past it with difficulty, we came to a place called Fair Havens, near the city of Lasea. – Acts 27:8

In January, I took our college students to Montreat, a Presbyterian Retreat center in North Carolina. I've been to Montreat dozens of times (maybe even a hundred by now). I still remember passing through the front gates for the first time when I was 14 years old and wondering what was inside. Various sermons, Bible studies, people, locations, flavors of ice cream, and sacred conversations immediately come to mind in one of those Holy Spirit memory jumbles.

I went in January, but I had not had the opportunity to visit Montreat last summer because I was becoming a new mother. In the chaos of that transition, I hadn't really missed Montreat... until I stepped back on its campus and so much tension in my body (that I didn't even know I had) jumped out of me and into Lake Susan. I paused for a moment and relaxed. It was almost like I was totally ready to hear God because God has spoken to me so many times in that very spot.

Prayer—Dear God, thanks for speaking to us in specific places and allowing us to return to those places confident that we will hear your voice again. Amen.

February 15 | Prayer | Carol Pye

For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him. – Psalm 62:5

I recently attended an event at which a Zen Buddhist spoke of silence as “letting go,” contrasting it to lives in which we spend so much time acquiring. This resonated deeply for me. In silence, I can strive to let go of those things which stand between me and a closer relationship to God: my preoccupation with my to-do list; stewing about situations and relationships which perplex me; a consuming busyness.

On those occasions when I have been able to experience silence, such as at the weekly Taize service at Church of the Advent down the road (every Thursday at 7:00 – all are welcome!), I have often found it to be transforming. Try it. Right now. Close your eyes. Take a deep breath, then just focus on breathing in and out in silence. Don't expect the answer to some long-deliberated problem to come to you like a lightning bolt. Just delight in God's presence. Even for a minute.

Prayer—Loving and persistent God, please keep tapping me on the shoulder until I actually stop and pay attention to you. I will create the silence, and I will wait for you. Amen.

February 16 | Relationships | Matthew Nickel

Many peoples shall come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.” For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. – Isaiah 2:3

This scripture speaks broadly of people seeking to know the ways of God. When I consider how God is present and speaking into our lives, I find that in the most important parts of my life there was someone who cared enough to be present in an important way. Often times, those are people who (whether they intended to or not) showed how God was somehow present. They didn't intend to guide. They didn't ask to be mentors or friends. They offered these through a relationship. And in reality, I was not looking for people to be these kinds of people for me. In hindsight, I know now that relationships help navigate the path and help us become who we are called to be, even when we don't see it happening.

I remember that Jack modeled the art of living well. Nancy taught about where faith and justice intersect. Geoff asked me to listen for stories. Nina demonstrated what it means to be a pastor. Doc opened me to how large the world really is and how very small. When I think about people who are important in my life, I can say how they pointed me to where God was present.

Prayer—Thank you God, for putting us in relationships that open us to the life you desire for us to live. Thank you for these people. Amen.

February 17 | Sacrifice | Suzanne Bowman

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

We were finally expecting our first child. Chances were high that this would be our only child. I had always envisioned being the career mom who did it all. But as I thought about the realities of my work schedule, I couldn't imagine only spending weekends and a few hours each evening with my baby. My job was not one that could be divided into a part time position, so it would have to be all or nothing. Knowing that, with the reduced income, we would have to sacrifice some of the creature comforts to which we had become accustomed, we made the tough decision of choosing family over career.

For two years, I did the “stay at home mom” thing, which was both the hardest and most wonderful job I’ll ever have. But then came the opportunity to teach music at Highland Presbyterian Parents Day Out. And then came the opportunity to direct Joyful Noise. And then came the opportunity to be the Soprano Vocalist and Section Leader for the Chancel Choir. Without planning to, I had managed to evolve my life long love of music into a new career, while still maintaining part time hours to leave space for my “mom” role. What initially felt like a sacrifice had turned into a beautiful opportunity!

I am often asked if I will ever go back to being a middle school counselor. I won’t rule it out, but for now, I’m certain I’m on the right path.

Prayer—God, when you lead us in a direction that calls us to make a sacrifice, help us to trust you and keep our eyes open for the new opportunities that lie ahead.

February 18 | Challenges | Jocelyn Kirk

He restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. – Psalm 23: 3

Is this the right path? Should I turn back? How many people think they should have taken the road less travelled or look back and wish they went with their friends on that well-worn path? One of the many challenges we have is the constant question of our path and whether it is the right one for us. I chose the Young Adult Volunteers Program in December of my senior year in college and then spent the following summer second-guessing my decision. But in the challenges we face, though they might be daunting, we are never alone. We have a support system—whether through our family, friends, church, or simply through our faith. God sometimes get a bad name because we blame God for the bad things in our life; that is why I love the phrase in this passage “He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.” It's like God knows God's name is at stake so God is there, guiding us down the darker paths to a brighter day. We might not know that the tunnel will end soon, but God is there, and knows that our challenge is almost over if we just continue down God's path.

Prayer—Oh God, though this path may have potholes and dark shadows ahead, remind us that we are carrying on this path to your side. Be with us on this journey as we take up the cross with Jesus, Amen.

February 19 | Transitions | Sara Gahan

When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. – Luke 1:57

When my son Grant was born two-and-a-half years ago and hours later diagnosed with Down syndrome, I felt like someone had come along and erased the neat little picture I had unknowingly crafted of my life and my family. I had a million questions, but so many of them didn't have answers. What types of delays will be experience? Would he need open heart surgery? Can he hear? Will he be fully accepted for who he is? Am I strong enough to be his mom? What is our new picture going to look like? I spent those first few weeks overwhelmed by the unknown...but the more time I spent with Grant, the more I realized that we needed to live our way into the answers. I would need to have faith that he would be okay, that he would be loved and accepted, that I could be the mom he wants and needs. I simply needed to believe—in him, in the goodness of others, in myself, in God.

Once I stopped questioning and started wholeheartedly believing, I saw magic everywhere. Grant showed me over and over again how tough and determined and joyful he is. Thanks to Grant, I have experienced up close and personal just how loving and supportive and GOOD people can be. I find such joy in the little things now, and I am beyond excited to bear witness to Grant's life and see more magic unfold. The birth of each of my sons changed me, as I am sure John's birth changed Elizabeth. Grant's birth will always mark for me a shift in my

life from a theoretical faith to a very real, daily, heart-opening, transformative faith. I have no idea what the future holds, but I have faith that it is full of hope and love and wonder beyond my greatest imagination. The past two and a half years with Grant certainly have been, and I am deeply grateful.

Prayer—Open us, O God, to faith that is full of hope, of love, and of wonder beyond imagination. Amen.

February 20 | Faithful Questions | Kevin Burns

Just like a deer that craves streams of water, my whole being craves you, God. My whole being thirsts for God, for the living God. When will I come and see God's face? My tears have been my food both day and night, as people constantly questioned me, "Where's your God now?" But I remember these things as I bare my soul: how I made my way to the mighty one's abode, to God's own house, with joyous shouts and thanksgiving songs—a huge crowd celebrating the festival! Why, I ask myself, are you so depressed? Why are you so upset inside? Hope in God! – Psalm 42:1-5

"When can I see God's face?" Seeing the "face of God" is a common expression in the Hebrew Bible. The expression refers to the feeling of being in God's presence, receiving the attention of a God who is love. The opposite is also a common expression among the Psalmist and the prophets. Isaiah 45:15 says, "Truly you are a God who hides himself, O God and Savior of Israel." Psalm 13:1, asks "How long, O LORD, will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" Psalm 22 begins with a similar statement (and two of the Gospels have Jesus quoting the Psalm on the cross): "My God, Why have you forsaken me?" These are clearly expressions of feelings of abandonment.

The author of Psalm 42 begins with the comparison that just like a deer craves the refreshing water of the stream, the Psalmist craves the presence of God. Others are apparently questioning this poet, "Where is your God now?" In verse 4, the Psalmist remembers the days when God's presence was clearly present and felt and proceeds to ponder the reasons for the depression and despair. The resulting exclamation in verse 5 is a command directed at the self: Hope!

This Psalm challenges us to remember the times in our lives when we felt abandoned by our God, which for most of us, it is not too difficult. From the awkwardness of Middle School through miseries of lost love in high school or early adulthood... From career and economic disappointments to personal illness and the death of love ones; life is frustrating! At some point, the despair of the moment becomes too great. The only viable answer is to focus on hope. And the only thing that most of us think of as worthy of this kind of desperate hope is God. In these depths, we embrace hope by learning how to move forward one step at a time, believing that God can work through our lives for God's purposes. We learn to acquire a mindset that is grounded in the sense of purpose we experience when working to make the lives of others better. That is why I choose to worship at a Church that sees its mission as "Sharing Hope from the Highlands."

Prayer—May the Hope that sees us through the worst of times spill over in our lives so that others may also know of your love for humanity.

February 21 | Sacred Places | Clay Gahan

So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." Genesis 32:30

Peniel, the "face of God." Some places are innately sacred because of their natural magnificence. Places like Half Dome, Victoria Falls, and Gibraltar come to mind. Some places become sacred because of long, storied histories connected to them--The Forbidden City, Westminster Abbey, The Zócalo. In these instances, there is a

slow, meticulous process, geological and anthropological, that renders these places sacred. Sometimes, though, God works more instantaneously, and a place that was pretty nondescript in one moment is suddenly made remarkable--changed forever--by the sheer power of His immediate presence. When Jacob directly encounters God on the shores of the Jabbok, he is not somewhere special (he's on the run), and despite being part of a significant lineage, Jacob hardly seems like a special individual at the time (he's swindled others as well as been swindled, and he seems to have more problems--many of which he created for himself-- than he can handle). In a tired moment just before he girds himself to cross the tributary, he is literally seized by God. It is not a pleasant experience. He literally has to hang on for dear life, and Jacob will walk with a limp afterwards. Yet, despite these un-fairy tale like elements, Jacob comes into the presence of God, and his map of the world and himself changes. He is suddenly brought into God's world, God's story, yet his demand for a blessing suggests that he is ready for such a sublime moment. If Jacob's behavior and attitudes are all too human, his readiness to encounter God in the profane (and mundane) contexts of this life should be seen as all the more inspiring. May we all be so ready.

Prayer—Dear Lord, This world and this life are sacred because you made them. Your presence never leaves us. Keep us mindful of the wonder that we are part of your great story, and instill in us a readiness to encounter you, Lord of all, when You come to find us. Amen.

February 22 | Sacrifice | Cynthia Campbell

The goal I pursue is the prize of God's upward call in Christ Jesus. – Philippians 3:14 (CEB)

Many of us have hymns that rumble around in our memories, surfacing from time to time to remind us a particular time in our journey of faith development. One I learned when I was an early young adult comes to mind reading these words of Paul. The hymn was written in the early 20th century by a Scottish pastor to inspire and encourage young people in the early days of World War I. “Christ of the upward way, my guide divine,/Where thou hast set thy feet, may I place mine,/And move and march wherever thou hast trod,/Keeping face forward up the hill of God.”

Paul compares our faith journey with a race in which he is striving to reach the goal or the finish line. For him, the goal is resurrection – life that transcends death and dying, life that is transformed from fear to hope, from anxiety to trust. The “upward call in Christ Jesus” is the invitation to live life confident that God’s love is stronger than any force that would hurt or destroy us or the world.

What is the “goal” of your faith journey? How would you describe the “upward way” that Jesus followed? And what is the path that Jesus is calling you to follow at this stage of your life? The last verse of the hymn repeats the first lines of the first verse and then concludes: “And when thy last call comes serene and clear,/Calm may my answer be, ‘Lord, I am here.’”

Prayer—Where you have set your feet, O God, may I place mine. Let my life move toward hope and trust. Amen.

February 23 | Challenges | Martin Hall

...who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. – Philippians 3:21 (NIV)

There are two conflicting realities about our bodies. The first is that we don’t give our bodies enough credit. Too often, we accept the narrative that we are unable to do this or that because we’ve never been athletic, or because our bodies aren’t quite as strong as they used to be. However, in many cases, these are just ideas, not biological facts. At 92 years of age, Harriette Thompson finished the 2015 San Diego Marathon. Erik Weihenmayer, who lost his vision as a teenager, ascended Mt. Everest. And though he was born without a right

hand, Jim Abbott pitched in major league baseball for 10 seasons. When people reject the narratives of what can and can't be done, new possibilities emerge.

And yet, the second reality about our bodies is that no matter how good our physical or psychological health, our bodies will ultimately betray us. In spite of their brilliance, they are not enough. In this verse, Paul reminds us that the end of our bodies is not the end of us.

Prayer—Dear God, we thank you for our bodies. May we treat them with respect and care, and may we use them to their full potential. Give us patience when they fail, and remind us they will one day be transformed.

February 24 | Transitions | Claudette Taylor

And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect. – Romans 12:2

Transitions are a natural part of living and growing. They begin very early in our lives and the resilience with which we approach them many times is a determining factor in our well-being. Transitions and the patterns we develop for approaching change are invaluable resources in developing our inner strength. They have particular value when, as a result of those transitions, we become stronger in our life of faith. Whether we are facing the loss of a loved one or a change in our family circumstances, change is difficult for most of us and it becomes even more difficult as we age. We find comfort in familiar things whether it be the people we know or the place where we live. Change brings uncertainty as well as a time for reevaluation and introspection and a review of our circumstances. It is very easy to think of our accomplishments in this life as a result of our own hard work, dedication, and determination to succeed. God, or life's circumstances depending on your point of view, is very good at "taking us down a peg or two." All of us can think of times in our lives when we felt that we were totally in charge of our circumstances and were surprised to find out that God had a plan for our lives that was different from our own. Change gives us the opportunity to reevaluate where we are and how we got there and to listen to our inner voice for direction.

Prayer—As we go into this Lenten Season let us focus on developing transforming old habits to conform less to the expectations of this world and more to God's will in our lives our love of Christ.

February 25 | Faithful Questions | Linda Raymond Ellison

I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord; I will remember your wonders of old. I will meditate on all your work, and muse on your mighty deeds. – Psalm 77:11-12

Years ago, another Highland member and I worked with Girl Scouts whose mothers were in prison. One pair of sisters, whose circumstances were desperate, especially touched our hearts. When the older girl was ready for high school, we worked hard to get her into a school where she could succeed. The Jefferson County Public School system made that maddeningly difficult. When school began, the girl's records were at the wrong school, so this educationally delicate child sat idle for three days in a school auditorium – despite our desperate efforts. From there, things went downhill fast. Finally my friend and I drove to her home and refused to go away until she talked to us. When she reluctantly emerged, the three of us went for a long, long walk in Shawnee Park as a golden afternoon sun angled through the trees. The girl poured out her heart. I KNEW God was present in that place.

But that golden afternoon didn't solve her problems. She got pregnant, dropped out of school and lost touch with us. I grieved. God had given me a job to do, and I had failed. Then, not long ago, I went to a Girl Scout reunion where the sisters had come to see their old friends and mentors. God had wrought a miracle:

The sisters had graduated from college, gotten good jobs and were raising their children right. God had used me for a minute. But they were his children. For me, it was a powerful lesson.

A memorial for the martyred Archbishop Oscar Romero suggests that we take a long view:

“The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. . . We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing this. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker...”

Prayer—God give me the grace to do your work and the faith to believe that you will use it for your purpose.

February 26 | Sacred Places | Suzanne Bowman

Jacob, however, went to Sukkoth, where he built a place for himself and made shelters for his livestock. That is why the place is called Sukkoth. – Genesis 33:17 (NIV)

It happened to me yet again this week. As I drove along, my mind raced, filled with thoughts of things to do, places to be, and people's needs to meet, all while the devil on my shoulder chided me for not keeping up with the house cleaning, err-ands, and healthy meals, and for not spending enough quality time with my family. But then I rounded the bend and saw it: the snow covered hill with two fuzzy equines delicately making their way down towards the partially frozen creek. I breathed deeply. “Fear not. I AM with you.”

The specific location has changed over the years, but the sense of God's presence I experience when I am with horses remains the same. Whether I am grooming, riding, mucking stalls, or just observing these majestic beasts as they graze, being with horses fills me with peace and the knowledge that God has a purpose and a plan.

Prayer—God, thank you for using your four-legged beasts to show us a glimpse of your unconditional love. Amen

February 27 | Prayer | Donna Perry

Come descendants of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the Lord. – Isaiah 2:5

More than 25 years ago my husband gave me a framed copy of “The Seventeenth Century Nun's Prayer” by An Unknown Nun. Since then this framed prayer has hung on the wall in our bedroom in the many places where we have made our home. I read it often, and aspire to live my life in keeping with it, particularly the closing paragraph:

“Give me the ability to see good things in unexpected places and talents in unexpected people. And, give me, O Lord, the grace to tell them so.”

In an often cynical and hypercritical world, it is important to seek out the good, to find the silver linings, in dark places, or with dark situations. With faith and God's grace lighting our way, may we all “see good things in unexpected places” and along the way, bring more light to the world around us.

Prayer—“Give me the ability to see good things in unexpected places and talents in unexpected people. And, give me, O Lord, the grace to tell them so.”

February 28 | Challenges | Betty Smith

He restores my soul; He leads me in the right paths for his name's sake. – Psalm 23:3

The right path began for me when I began attending Sunday School at Highland Presbyterian. That was the beginning of my love and participation in Sunday School and it has never ended. Along the way we studied the Catechism and memorized Bible passages. The 23rd Psalm and The Ten Commandments I remember the best. The only challenge had been to stand and repeat them correctly. Eventually I taught Sunday School. Studying and teaching the History of the Christian Church was a path that deepened my faith. It was so important and interesting to learn how the church had evolved and to be a part of it. The challenge was finding ways to enhance the lessons in creative ways for the Sixth Graders. We attacked big projects for that purpose. As the years went by other paths opened, serving on Boards, Committees, the Session and becoming a Stephen Minister but the Worship Committee, which I am still a member provided yet another path. Becoming aware of the ways we praise God in worship, one being our beautiful music, it came to me that beautiful art would add something special. Bring together our artists to share ideas led to the creation of banners, canopies, and draperies. Working with Art in our Worship has been a very special path for me. When one looks back at what has been along the way it brings out how one path leads to many others. How fortunate it was for me to be led to Mrs. Walker's Sunday School class. How the many years here at Highland Presbyterian Church have nourished my soul and spirit. God restores and nourishes our souls guiding us to the right paths by awakening us with the Spirit.

Prayer—Thank you God, for leading us in the right directions and helping us with the challenges. "Your paths overflow with plenty."

February 29 | Relationships | Susan Sawning

I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. – Psalm 139:14 (NIV)

In my role as Research Director at the University of Louisville School of Medicine, I get the privilege of being involved in several projects aimed at changing the future of health care. One of those projects is *eQuality*, an initiative that will train medical students on the unique health care needs of individuals that are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT), gender nonconforming (GNC) or born with differences of sex development (DSD). I have multiple friends in the LGBT community, so going into this project, I did not expect it to be the transformative experience it has been.

As part of our Medical Education Grand Rounds last summer, we invited members of the transgender community to the School to dialogue with faculty, staff, and medical students. My eyes were opened to the depth of mistreatment and hurt experienced by members of this community. I was particularly shocked by the deep wounds inflicted on LGBT individuals by religious organizations in this country. Instead of trying to defend my own progressive religious beliefs during these conversations, I have begun to ask what I am actively doing on a minute to minute basis to help others feel loved, included, accepted, and celebrated. How, as a mother, colleague, church and community member, am I affirming that *everyone* is fearfully and wonderfully made, a work of God?

Prayer—God, forgive me when I fail to actively include others into my community. Help me to know full well that all are wonderfully made, deserving of our love, kindness, community, and inclusion.

March 1 | Sacrifice | Jocelyn Kirk

The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. – Psalm 51:17

The idea of a sacrifice always seems one-sided. Most people use the word “sacrifice” to gain pity or inspire guilt: “I sacrificed my afternoon to help you, and you didn’t even thank me!” But what is beautiful about sacrifice is that so many people benefit from sacrifice, even the person making the sacrifice. There are many examples of this in everyday life, and currently in my life; I “sacrificed” a year of my life to serve in New Orleans. In that sacrifice I feel that I am truly helping my YAV community and my students but I am also helping myself find my true passion in life. When Jesus sacrificed himself, we didn’t just get some cool holidays out of it. In this passage, we are sacrificing ourselves to God through a broken spirit, contrition and forgiveness. However, we are helping ourselves because we are truly facing our God and trusting his steadfast love; God is also getting a sweet deal by getting our love and our developing understanding of our faith in him. So there is an equal peace in sacrifice that can create stability.

Prayer—Dear Lord, remind us that as we sacrifice for you that you sacrificed your greatest gift for us, your son. Be with us as we walk the path of Gethsemane with him and wait for his resurrection in you, Amen.

March 2 | Transitions | Kevin Burns

The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³ He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. ²⁴ Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. ²⁵ When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob’s hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. ²⁶ Then he said, “Let me go, for the day is breaking.” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.” ²⁷ So he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” ²⁸ Then the man said, “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.” – Genesis 32: 22-28

Who among us has not laid in bed in the middle of the night staring at the ceiling trying to resolve conflicts in our lives caused by life changes, contemplating our fears, worrying about the next day’s challenges, or experiencing anxiety over some family crisis. This is the human condition. We cannot control all the inputs that affect our daily existence and sometimes we don’t allow ourselves to slow down enough during our daily grind to contemplate the complicated transitions. But in the silence of the night, our minds have a way of forcing us to relive our anxieties in the desperate hope of finding some new epiphany that will make daybreak easier to face.

Few of us look back on these experiences with fondness, but often the morning light brings a renewed sense of hope and a sense that the onward struggle will ultimately bring clarity. While these overnight psychological wrestling experiences may result in little sleep, when we realize that new perspectives are on the horizon and solutions around the corner, we don’t resent the process. Eventually, we may even celebrate it. Perhaps this is how God works within us and the Jacob story simply gives us a narrative framework to understand the inner workings of God in our own minds. Jacob is fleeing from a complicated family history and facing the deserved and likely revenge of a brother that he cheated. The only means of finding peace is for Jacob to encounter his God in the depths of the darkest night and emerge the next morning a changed person feeling blessed and hopeful of new beginnings. As is often the case in our lives, it is frequently a changed attitude that allows us to recognize the good that is right in front of us.

Prayer—May the peace of God which passes all understanding keep our anxieties at bay and our spirits hopeful.

March 3 | Faithful Questions | Carol Pye

He said therefore, 'What is the kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it? It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches.' – Luke 13: 18-19

Every time we say the Lord's Prayer, we invite the coming of God's kingdom. Sometimes I wonder what it would look like if we found ourselves – here on earth – settled into that promised kingdom, nestled in the branches of God's love.

My hopeful self imagines:

- An end to violence. Through softened hearts or a, um, relocation of the violent? God's call on that one (as in all other things, of course).
- God's love moving through us all, manifested in kindness toward others and the assurance that everyone's need for food and shelter are met – not in the bare essentials, but in abundance!
- Banishing a need for dominance, and an acceptance of the value of every life as equal in God's eyes.
- An end to the acquiring (and marketing) of material goods which do not further the well-being of all God's creatures.
- And the gobsmacking truth of this is that some of these hopeful imaginings are within our reach today. Is it possible that we can help usher in the kingdom?

Prayer—Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.

March 4 | Sacred Places | Matthew Nickel

When they came to Marah, they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter. That is why it was called Marah. - Exodus 15:23

In Michigan, there is beach on Old Mission Peninsula that faces toward the sunset. The beach looks out into a bay toward an island about a mile from the peninsula, a brief canoe ride. The coast here is not what you would call a wild coast. Along the shore are docks with small boats for sailing or waterskiing. Dotted along these beaches are stone fire pits, racks for kayaks, and picnic tables. In the summers, the town fills with families on vacation. The locals dive into a wilderness and water lifestyle that embraces playing in the water, hiking in the woods, taking in the short and wonderfully warm summer.

These sands and waters show patterns of life for those looking for them. In early June countless carp flood the shallow waters to spawn. They blanket the water's surface so completely that swimming is impossible. When the water warms in July, people are swimming out to a raft moored past the shallows but not to the deep. If you know the rocks and boulders and abandon moorings on the bottom of the lake, you can find your way to the raft without looking up. In the cool nights that give respite to hot August days, there are few finer ways to welcome evening than with a bonfire. When night begins to fall, the sky grows many shades, the water can seem to take a rest from the energy of the day, and tired bodies settle in to give thanks, in their own way, to the beauty of this place that God has made.

Prayer—Holy God, guide us to give thanks for the places that you have made, that you have given us, where are live unfold in your mystery. Amen.

March 5 | Prayer | Terry Fontenot

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, 'Teacher, order your disciples to stop.' He answered, 'I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.' – Luke 19:39-40.

Several of us here at HPC had a great opportunity to visit Portugal recently led by our own erudite member, Stephanie Maloney. We visited Roman and Moorish cities and castles built of **stones** still standing after all those centuries. As I read the Luke passage I found myself rethinking and reliving the experience of the Roman structures and castle **stones**. The creative human spirit and energy and the Creator of that spirit make me want to "**shout out**" how nature testifies to the wonder and glory of God.

Standing in a field with 96 3,000 year old rocks/stones placed in patterns designed for spiritual rituals was a moving, grounding spiritual experience. People so long ago reaching toward the heavens, pointing to the sunrise with their **stones** were close to the natural world and their Creator.

Along the way I encountered **stones** that were ancient, hard, shaped and supporting. The **stones** that were of the Earth itself spinning in a vast universe that was somehow created and held by God. For me this passage speaks to the awesomeness, stability and wonder that Jesus delivered to us.

Prayer—Lord keep us close as we shout about your glory and wondrous ways on this Earth and beyond.

March 6 | Relationships | Frank Heller III

You are indeed my rock and my fortress; for your name's sake lead me and guide me. –Psalm 31:3

I am blest to have God surrounding and uplifting me. God is always present in my life as it grows and changes each new day. I am grateful for the foundation God provides me.

When I reflect on the path that my life has taken since I first started in music ministry, I am amazed and humbled at the abundant opportunities that have been afforded and granted to me.

Through retreats and overnight, I have witnessed and experienced the beauty of deepening relationships and strong bonds that have developed with many singers and their families.

Through worship, I have felt closer to God and know that my faith has grown. Being in communion with so many wonderful people has given me the rich opportunity to see the face of Jesus in others' faith.

Through fellowship, I have felt a spiritual connection to the greater good in all souls. How awesome it is to be inspired by others who reveal God's plan for the journey of life.

Prayer—Lead me, O Lord. Teach me to always seek your guidance. Show me your way. Amen.

March 7 | Relationships | Carol Pye

So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. – 2 Corinthians 5:20

In this passage from 2 Corinthians, Paul points out how God is working through the early Christians to bring others to embrace God's reconciling love. A careful look around today shows us that God is clearly still using us to manifest this love.

In January, the Deacons and Adult Education Committee presented a three-part class, "Where was God when...." Cynthia Campbell spoke of the doors closed to a woman pastor at the time she completed her M.Div. Doodle Harris spoke of her emotionally wrenching struggle with infertility. Our neighbor down the road, Joe Phelps of Highland Baptist, shared the pain of his son's death. I was struck by the consistency of the answer to "Where was God..." According to our speakers, God showed up in the people who showed up: to listen

compassionately, to encourage, to reassure, to console, to feed, to shield, to embrace. God was in the loving care, and I am so grateful to be in a faith community which lives this out daily.

Prayer—Compassionate God, “take my hands and let them move at the impulse of thy love.” Amen. * From Frances Ridley, Havergal, 1874*

March 8 | Challenges | Woodford Henegar

When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can flesh do to me? – Psalm 56:3-4

About twenty years ago, both of my parents were battling terminal cancer. I live 90 minutes from their home. My sister and I had known that my mother was very ill, but we learned about my dad’s illness when it was quite advanced. It was a frightening time in my life.

Fear has many faces: alarm, apprehension, dread and panic all of which reflect the degree of fear. Sometimes fear takes over your mind; sometimes it causes physical reactions like breaking out in a cold sweat or weeping. The last six months of their lives, I experienced all these emotions.

I spent a lot of time in my car traveling to be with them, and those drives across Interstate 64 became my regular one-on-one conversations with God. When I reached their house, I was ready to put my fears aside, and just be their daughter. God walked with me every step of the way.

My parents died six days apart, my mother first, and then my father. My sister and I were with both of them when they died. They had wonderful lives and lived a long time. Their loss was acute, but as God walked with us, we were able to celebrate their lives sooner and grieve for them less.

Prayer—Dear God: Walk with us and talk with us as we battle our fears. Help us trust in Your way and follow Your path.

March 9 | Transitions | Linda Valentine

Wait for the Lord; Be strong, and let your heart take courage; Wait for the Lord! – Psalm 27:14

Last summer I ran into one of my daughter’s friends. Both about five years out of college, she said they had been talking a lot about “what’s next?” as they move beyond their first steps of adult lives and careers. “That’s what my friends and I talk about!” I exclaimed, because after four decades of adult lives and careers we ponder that, too. I was amused to read John Buchanan’s new year’s blog. Reflecting on his retirement after 55 years as a minister, John writes, “After just two weeks people are asking me how it feels to be retired? ...Freedom is delicious. But at the same time I have been asking myself, ‘What’s next? Who am I now?’”

“What’s next?” can an anxious question. Throughout our lives we experience transitions, some voluntary, some not. Transitions mean loss, leaving, and often uncertainty about what lies ahead. Am I still needed? Will I have enough? Will I be enough? Why can’t I make things happen – now?

Parker Palmer’s little book, Let Your Life Speak has been a comfort and guide for me in times of transition. It’s about listening for God’s call on our lives. Often, that takes patience. But it comes. God works in God’s time, not ours. God calls to us throughout our lives. So wait, listen, and pray for courage to follow God’s call.

Prayer—Be present to us God in life’s transitions in all our stages of life. As life changes, remind us to awaken to your leading with courage and attention. Amen.

March 10 | Faithful Questions | Jane Welch

So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." – John 20:25

From time to time I have tortured myself with a doubt equal to poor, agnostic Thomas' in this pitiful confession to his faith filled colleagues. The times of emptiness never last long. A good hour of Sunday worship or of soul searching in Sunday School usually brings me back to my senses, but the emptiness that I feel during these dark periods is real and very distressing. Suppose all I hold so important is only wishful thinking, I opine, and I become heavy hearted and hard headed.

Sometime I wonder if I don't create these agnostic periods because it's dramatic – the idea of of getting through a day without God. The reality of course is that though I have forsaken God, I am not forsaken by God – the God of my Mother, of my Father, my brothers, of both sets of grandparents, of my aunts and uncles. We spoke of Him often. We had family prayers daily. My husband and I raised our children the same way. In my best moments I know that Jesus Christ is so engrained into my being I could not live without Him.

So why these attacks of doubt? Michael Jenkins in a recent blog writes, "Progress in the life of the Spirit is a matter of spiritual proximity." It is not a gradual procession up a ladder. We don't get enlightened as we get older. Grace abounds but only if you open yourself to it through prayer, contemplation, study and worship. We should not take our faith for granted anymore than we do our secular relationships.

Prayer—My Lord and my God, fill my heart and mind with such gratitude for your Being in all those people whom I knew and loved so well that I may feed my faith with your Spirit as they did to the end. Amen

March 11 | Sacred Places | Lynn Gant March

If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. – Psalm 139:9-10

I love this psalm. Perhaps verses 7-12 have to do with pilgrimage. In February I made a pilgrimage to Israel/Palestine with a group of ministers and friends of Louisville Presbyterian Seminary. I was expecting to have a mountaintop experience being in the Holy Land. I admit it was inspiring to see the major sites of Jesus' birth, life, death and resurrection and now having been there, it adds to my understanding of the New Testament. However, the crowds in especially Jerusalem deterred from my hoped for closer walk with Jesus. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre there was interesting, but not a religious experience for me. How could one small area be the site of Jesus' crucifixion, burial and resurrection? How could 6 different orthodox religious orders have their own chapels there and feud over any type of change proposed, even to remove a ladder over the main entrance? And to boot, a Muslim has the key to open the doors. But not far away lay the Church of St. Anne, the traditional birthplace of the Virgin Mary and named after her mother. It was tucked away from the hubbub of the masses of pilgrims and a beautiful, simple, bright place of prayer and contemplation. Our group, like many who visit, sang songs of praise in the sanctuary, known for its brilliant acoustics. It was moving to hear our voices echoed throughout, haunting even. Once outside, viewing the Pools of Bethesda, I noticed a group of Black evangelicals go inside. When I heard their spontaneous, joyous, ecstatic voices singing where we had just been, I was compelled to go back in. I was mesmerized and deeply moved by the depth of their devotion. Finally, the mountaintop experience I so hoped for to rejuvenate my spiritual depths! And I discovered the place to meet Jesus once again was in my own Bethlehem, Nazareth and Jerusalem, wherever I am!

Prayer—Inviting God, you have searched us and known us; help us to search for and know you wherever we are. Amen!

March 12 | Prayer | Jenny Siegenthaler

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord." – Luke 1:46

Mary and the unborn Jesus have just been blessed by Elizabeth. Mary bursts into a song of joy and praise to God for the amazing gift that she is carrying. Her faith and joy are inspirational.

In a recent Sunday School lesson, the children and I discussed angels and how we might react if an angel appeared in our midst. Most of us thought we would be surprised, maybe suspicious, and/or fearful. Mary must have been surprised and overwhelmed at the notion that she could carry the Messiah, yet instead of cowering, or showing fear or shame, here with Elizabeth she bursts into song and praises God. She later sings, "my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." She puts aside her self in order to honor God.

Sometimes we may each miss the opportunity to hear God because we are surprised, afraid or just "busy." Even if we hear him, we may worry more about our selves than the message we are receiving. We should keep this verse in our minds, so that we hear God's voice.

Prayer—God, forgive our failure to hear your messages to us. Open our hearts and minds to hear your voice so that we may fully serve you.

March 13 | Relationships | W. Eugene March

Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. – Isaiah 55:3

Taking an Honest Look at Myself—When I was nineteen, I felt the desire to go into the ministry. To become a Presbyterian minister requires a number of steps, including undergoing psychological testing. I underwent the testing and then went in to discuss the outcome. The attending psychologist carefully shared her findings and then looked me in the eye and said something to this effect: "Gene, you have clear gifts for ministry, but unless you quit hating your father, you won't be worth much to anyone."

Now, I didn't know anyone knew how I despised my father for having divorced my mom and abandoning the family. But I did, as the tests clearly revealed. The psychologist went on to say, "In six months come back and tell me what you are going to do about this."

During those months an amazing thing happened. I repented, and began to forgive my dad. Over the next several years we mended our relationship. When he died, it was as an admired father, not as a despised deserter. That repentance marked a vital turning point in my journey!

Prayer—Dear God, help us to see ourselves clearly and to do what is necessary to align ourselves with your gracious love.

March 14 | Sacrifice | Doodle Harris

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. – Ephesians 4:4-6

Every year as the children are preparing for the children's pageant, there is a fight. Who gets what part? After all, some kids have been waiting to be Mary or Joseph *their whole lives!* Plus, the narrator has the most lines, so that part is attractive as well.

This past year, four of our fourth graders wanted the same part. I decided that the best way to solve the problem was through the holy method of "rock, paper, scissors." Before we could play, one girl said, "you know, I could also play this other part." And another said, "what if we share our lines?" And a third asked, "could we write some more lines so everyone has some?"

And so, instead of the original five narrators I had planned on, we had twelve narrators. Twelve children told the story of Jesus' birth rather than five: one awesome lesson in sacrifice.

Prayer—Mighty God, teach us that rather than being sacrificial, we can be creative. Remind us that we do not have to be creatively sacrificial alone. Amen.

March 15 | Challenges | John Miller

I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. – Isaiah 43:19

Al and I had been battling 30 mph headwinds for a week. We were bicycling cross-country with full packs, pushing west across Kansas into relentless winds. That day as we struggled into a dusty little town, we looked for a place to camp and cook—anywhere with a privy, a picnic table, and a water spigot. We suffered from hunger, dehydration, and bone-deep weariness.

We started by asking for advice at the police station. The officer at the desk looked us over: two pitiful, middle-aged guys who seemed helpless. He pointed us toward a small city park. As we were unloading our tents, a young man in a sport coat approached and invited us to spend the night in the basement of his church. "We have a bedroom, a shower, and a kitchen there for visitors," the pastor reassured us. "You'll have it to yourselves."

The next morning, fed and refreshed, we were loading our bikes when the pastor stopped by to see how we were doing. After we thanked him, Al tried to hand him a twenty-dollar bill "for the collection plate," but he refused it, saying "then your visit won't be a blessing." I'm not sure what he meant, but I know that our weakness became a blessing to us and probably to him as well. We pressed on, headed for Seattle, with the wind at our backs.

Prayer—Dear Lord, help us to go in weakness, rather than power, and to have confidence that you will provide rivers in the desert.

March 16 | Transitions | Pam Phelps

I will praise you as long as I live, and in your name I will lift up my hands. – Psalm 63:4

Too many people I love have died. Whether expected or a shock, it is always difficult. Eventually, everyone I love, I will grieve for or they will grieve for me. The prospect that we will be reunited is small comfort to me now. But they have all touched my life. They have inspired me, made me laugh, comforted me, served as cautionary tales, danced with me, set good examples, taught me, sung with me, and cared for me. The more people I lose, the more I appreciate how rich my life has been because of wonderful, interesting, loving people who accompany me along the way.

Prayer—Loving Creator, thank you for showing me how to love and be loved through the people in my life. Help me to appreciate them and be thankful for the blessings they are to me. Through their love, I see your face. Amen

March 17 | Challenges | Charles Brockwell

I rise before dawn and cry for help; I hope for Your word. – Psalm 119:147 (The Jewish Study Bible).

HELP AND HOPE THOUGH NIGHT MUST FALL—*Night Must Fall*, an award winning psychological thriller, was performed on stage, screen, and radio from 1935-1999. This phrase comes to my mind in experiences that St. John of the Cross discerned as the dark night of the soul.

Night must fall is a universal verity, isn't it? We lose -- our career's upward trajectory; the career itself; our health; a heart held friend; immediate family, our "'til death us do part" companion. Night must fall and we cry for help -- often with little hope. F. Scott Fitzgerald said, "In a real dark night of the soul it is always three o'clock in the morning." I'm a witness, aren't you?

Jesus promised, "I will not leave you desolate, I will come to you" (John 14:18). And through the church -- the community of that hope which is grounded in trust (faith) and love, the church, his new humanity -- he keeps this promise. Lent comes at the time of Jesus and the church's long march from Galilee into their dark night of the soul. Then came Easter, which the church trusts. Then came the continuing resurrection community of love, which the church is. And so, we, the church, both receive and offer help and hope even though night must fall.

Prayer—Come to us Lord, even in dark times of life, even in the cry of mercy, open us to your hopeful promise of new life. Amen.

March 18 | Sacred Places | Claudette Taylor

Then cometh Jesus with them unto a place called Gethsemane and saith unto his disciples, Sit ye here, while I go over yonder and pray. – Matthew 26:36 (ASV)

In this passage, Jesus and his disciples have had the Passover meal together and he takes three disciples with him to spend time in the solitude of the Mount of Olives to pray and ask that the coming ordeal be taken from him. He seeks the quiet of the garden to pray to have the burden taken from him and to gather his resolve for what is to come.

In my life, and I suspect in yours, there are such places for us where we gain strength in the solitude and beauty of a place. These places become sacred places in our lives. It may be a place of beauty or a place that simply allows us to clear away the distractions of our daily routine and concentrate on finding our inner strength and direction. Sunday morning worship provides one opportunity for us to put down the business of everyday life and concentrate on the whys of life. For many of us it is the weekly touchstone for reminding us who we are and what we believe... Each year for the past thirty years our family has taken a week or two to stop the world and get off so we can spend time at the beach and with each other. The time away from routine to read, walk the beach and just hang with each other gives strength knowing we are loved by each other and that life is essentially a good gift from God.

Just as Jesus felt the need for a time of reflection and solitude at Gethsemane. We, in our daily lives, need to work to find that "quiet time" that allows us to develop and nourish our inner strength that encourages us to rely on a power greater than ourselves and to say our thanks for the daily blessings that God showers in our lives

Prayer—As we go through this Lenten Season, guide us to find quiet times and spaces each day to gather our strength for the coming days.

March 19 | Song | Kim Hansford

Oh sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth! – Psalm 96:1

I am very much a layperson in this congregation and am always in awe at the depth of knowledge of the congregation around me, and the talents possessed by so many. Our choir and musicians are amazing and we are rich from the blessings they share. Music transcends and can touch the heart of all of us, even if initially resistant. So it is no surprise that God uses it through so many people and in so many forms.

I am a professional performer, but only in the privacy of my own car. And I find our local contemporary gospel station helps me get ready to face the day on so many early mornings as I head down 64 into the sunrise. This week the song Amazing Grace by Phil Wickham came on the radio as I was thinking about what I was going to write or say.

"This is amazing grace
This is unfailing love
That you would take my place
That you would bear my cross
You lay down your life
That I would be set free
Oh, Jesus, I sing for
All that You've done for me"

It seemed like the perfect answer I was searching for in response to the Psalm.

"Oh sing to the Lord a new song: sing to the Lord all the Earth!"

My talents may not be professional but that's ok. I can sing for all that he has done for me and that is just enough. Let it fill my soul up and spill over so that I have enough to share a kind word or smile to someone else who needs it.

Prayer—Gracious heavenly Father, raise our hearts and minds with the words and melody to praise you. Let it speak through our daily lives and remind us of all you have done for us and return our praise to you.

March 20 | Sacrifice | Matthew Nickel

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. Ephesians 4:4-6

A few years ago, I began to feel like my life was filled with noise. The world got loud. It felt crowded. The news seemed to always get worse. Every crisis that made headlines demanded greater urgency than the last. Time seemed like a strangely precious commodity since it felt like friends and colleagues didn't have time to gather. People in my life seemed overcome by politics that were touched all parts of our lives: personal, professional, familial, and national.

I remember asking an older, wiser colleague about this feeling, this sense of crowdedness. He said the world has always been like this. In my heart I knew this was true. In the middle of the noise, what I longed for was reflection. But not just a personal, individual, on-my-own type of reflection. I longed for a space for perspective and reflection among other people. I desired the experience of being vulnerable among people I could trust.

Lent is a special season in the church's year because it creates a space for repentance and reflection, fasting and opportunities to face the vulnerable aspects of human life. Our world doesn't have many places for this kind of reflection, but every year, starting on Ash Wednesday, the opportunity is ours. By opening ourselves

to this spacious, risky, ash marked experience, we open ourselves to what God does for us and with us, in our lives and our relationships. But to seek this space requires sacrifice. If only we are so bold, we can open our individual lives to intersect with God and one another in Lent.

Prayer—When the world feels crowded and noisy, offer us the gift of space, of community, of reflection in ways that bring us into your presence. Amen.

March 21 | Faithful Questions | Martin Schindler

Seek the Lord while He may be found; Call on Him while He is near. – Isaiah 55:6

I am drawn to this passage in particular as it relates to the presence of God in relation to one's own life. While often reminded of the presence of God while sitting in Highland Presbyterian on a Sunday morning, I sometimes fail to recognize that God walks with me at all times – not merely the times where I “think” about him or meditate or pray. Over the past few years I have been fortunate to travel to some very distinct parts of the Earth and witness parts of Mother Nature I had never experienced. My brother's wedding in May of 2012 took my family to Iona, a tiny island off the northern coast of the Highlands region of Scotland. A Christian ecumenical community, Iona made it easy for me to feel God's presence as the “thinness” of the island felt like it shortened the distance between the heavens and Earth.

Then in January of 2014, I had the pleasure of going with family on a backpacking trek in the Patagonia region of southern Chile. While climbing the rocky terrain for hours on end, we took frequent breaks to merely take in the sightlines of the Chilean mountains. In addition, we forged friendships with fellow backpackers along the way, as we often stayed with the same people each night at the hostels. Again, I often thought of my faith and spirituality during the long periods in nature.

And most recently, I was fortunate to travel with other members of Highland to Nicaragua in January 2015. Since we have detailed that mission further, all I will say here is that God's presence was felt strongly in the community of Mirazul. Which brings me to the present. I often remind myself of these trips to “focus” and clear my mind. But also it is important to take a step back in the daily grind, and to have a quiet moment. For the words in this passage are a call to action: “Seek the Lord.”

Prayer—Dear God, please give me the strength and awareness to call on You everyday, whether in a new environment or the confines of daily life. Amen.

March 22 | Challenges | Helen Jones

Be strong and take heart all you who hope in the Lord. – Psalm 31:24

On January 1st, I returned home from the annual World Day of Prayer for Peace, Interfaith Prayer service, to find an email inviting church members to write a Lenten Devotional. This peace service delivers many challenges, not least among them being the, “Pledge of Nonviolence”. Together we pledge the following: I commit to live a life of nonviolence by:

- Transforming my violent thoughts into thoughts of benefitting others
- Avoiding violent words that harm or humiliate others
- Resisting fighting back even if I am provoked
- Refusing to bully anyone or allow anyone to be bullied
- Choosing forgiveness, tolerance and patience as my regular response to others' violence

Adopting compassionate-mind and loving-kindness toward others

I make this commitment today for the benefit of my community, all people and our world. If you are able to take this pledge then I believe that Psalm 31, verse 24 will be a challenge you can meet.

Prayer—Creator God, give us the strength to take heart, as we hope in your son, our Lord Jesus.

March 23 | Sacred Places | Kevin Burns

And Abraham called the name of that place The LORD Shall See (YHWH-jireh). – Genesis 22: 14

“That place” appears to be near the top of a mountain in the land of Israel. Mountaintops are often the locations in the ancient world for people to go seeking a thin place in close proximity to the divine. In the Biblical text, mountains are often the sacred places where God connects and communicates to his servants. A primary example is Mount Sinai (also called Mount Horeb). It is this mountain where God speaks to Moses from the burning bush, where God gives the Law, and where the prophet Elijah hears God in the silence following the storm. I think we in the modern world can understand why this made sense to the ancients. Once a year, I try to find time to trek up Lookout Mountain at the retreat center of Montreat with our young people while participating in an annual conference. The experience is always a special one. At the peak, the view is breathtaking. The vantage point that allows the view of miles of hills and forests, and what appears to be an up close view of the cloud fronts and the beautiful colors of the sunrise, also creates in us the sense that we can imagine God’s perspective (if only for a short time.) We all need these places and these memories. If we visit such a place while we happen to be wrestling with difficult issues in our lives, these places can sometimes inspire clarity of thought and a palpable sense of God’s presence.

This well-known Bible text describes such an experience for Abraham, which explains why he would name it as he did. Reading verse 14 in the Hebrew yields the expression: Abraham called the name of that place “The LORD Shall See” or more idiomatically, “the LORD shall see *to it*. Many versions of the Bible in print in English simply translate it to “the LORD provides.” What did the LORD (YHWH) provide for Abraham in this story? First, God provided a test... a question or challenge for Abraham to answer about himself. This is the very first thing the storyteller makes clear to the reader. Why? I believe the intention is that we not get lost in worry over the fate of Isaac. He is not the point. The point is the test. Will Abraham find the faith to follow the bizarre command to bind up his son and proceed with the sacrifice of the one thing he values the most (and had been waiting for since he was introduced to the reader in chapter 12). His son, Isaac, is the fulfillment of the covenant promise that he would have a vast number of descendants. For 10 chapters of narrative, the plot has suggested alternative solutions that have all proved not to be God's way of providing for this long awaited promise. Finally after extensive narrative, Abraham has the child offspring with his beloved Sarah. God had indeed provided. But just a few chapters later, could God really be threatening now to take it away? (or for Abraham to give it up?) Of course at the end of the story, God provides the animal that would take Isaac’s place on the altar, for which Abraham is exceptionally thankful leading him to declare that “the Lord provides.”

What did God ultimately provide to Abraham at this sacred place on the mountain? It seems to me what God provided was an opportunity for Abraham to stretch his faith. Frankly, it wasn’t a fun experience, nor a comfortable one for Abraham. But it was a vital one. It was the experience that gave meaning to his entire life story. It makes sense that the vulnerability and openness required to learn from such an experience would be sensitized in this sacred space high up in the mountains. I think this kind of faith stretching experience is what I seek when I climb up Lookout Mountain every year. This is why it makes sense that I go up with the young people with whom I have traveled. If you have never been on a trip with the youth from our church, this may not make sense. But, there is nothing that stretches our faith into new perspectives than observing the growth of faith of those entrusted into our care. And there is nothing that gives testimony to what God can do in our lives more than observing God in the lives of those we care about.

Prayer—May we ever be open to those places in our lives where those in our community can share of themselves and stretch us into doing the same.

March 24 | Prayer | Kathy Reed

And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people. – Ephesians 6:18 (NIV)

Five years ago I found myself with a sincere yearning for a closer connection with God and a deeper relationship with the women of Highland Presbyterian Church. Our then Associate Pastor, Rev. Melissa Head, agreed that our church needed another women's group and was willing to help.

I was relieved to find that other HPC women felt the same way. Thus grew WINGS (Women IN God's Spirit). Over the years we have had many meaningful retreats and monthly meetings of various subjects. My favorite part is always our special time of sharing our joys and concerns.

We have literally prayed "all kinds of prayers and requests". From loved ones struggling with medical issues, grandchildren being born, children facing important decisions, weddings, a lost dog, refugee crisis, HPC members, job changes, and more. Then we get the opportunity to hear a recount of our prayers that have been answered! What a gift from God this group of extraordinary women has been for each other and myself.

Prayer—Loving God, thank you for the people in our lives and the opportunities to share our joys and concerns with You. Amen.

March 25 | Relationships | Doodle Harris

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. – Ephesians 5:21

I was not brave enough to share this truth when I was last interviewing for youth ministry jobs, but I suppose it is okay to share now: ministry is all about relationships. Youth don't listen to pastors unless they know we love them. Youth must be taught to care for one another. Youth must be reminded that in the deepest, darkest moments of their lives they may not recognize God, but they will find other youth and adults who *will* listen, who *will* respond, and who *will* help.

With young people, recognizing one another as brothers and sisters isn't a result of our faith in God. We don't automatically others in our youth group because Jesus tells us so. We play together and laugh together and share together. And in those moments when we find that we love our friends and – sometimes surprisingly – we learn that they love us back, that's when we find God's love. Youth ministry is not about believing then loving; it is about loving, then believing.

Prayer—Dear God, when we cannot find you, give us patience. When we need you, give us courage to seek out our brothers and sisters in Christ. Amen.

March 26 | Song | Suzanne Bowman

Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path. – Psalm 119:105 (KJV)

I confess that I do not have a regular habit of reading the Bible. How grateful I am, then, that my scripture lessons come to me through music! I first heard the words of Psalm 119:105 through the song by Amy Grant. Since then, she has been my "go to" artist for listening to the old favorite hymns and Christmas carols as well as

new songs of faith. If you ever notice me smiling during the scripture readings at church then getting a far-away look in my eyes, I am likely singing in my mind the song through which I first learned that scripture. Hymns, praise choruses, and choir anthems – all have taught me scripture, often without me even realizing it. While some may be able to recite memorized scripture when a circumstance calls for it, my mind recalls the songs of faith that have spoken to my heart throughout the years.

Prayer—God, you speak to each of us in the ways our hearts can best hear you. Thank you for speaking your word through song. Amen

March 27 | Faithful Questions | Dave Crittenden

The Word became flesh and made his home among us. We have seen his glory, glory like that of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. – John 1:14 (CEB)

“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” John 1:1 So God is the Word and the Word is Christ. I think that helps. I have spent the majority of my life seeking to know as much of God as possible realizing the totality of God is incomprehensible. I have questions for God: what do you want me to do with my life? Am I even close to what is acceptable to you? Over the years this verse has helped me get a glimpse of God and pointed me to answers.

The Word took on a form I recognize. I can relate to Christ. What I see in Christ helps me see the expansiveness of God's grace. I still don't understand it all. Christ assures me that the Word knows me and I know the direction to look for answers to my questions.

Prayer—Creator Sustainer: Thank you for revealing who and what you are in so many ways. It is an experience of grace that ignites gratitude in me and I hope through me. Amen.

Lent 2016 Highland Presbyterian Church

Ash Wednesday – February 10

5:30pm – Ash Wednesday Soup Supper (Church Dining Room)

6:30pm – Ash Wednesday Worship

You are invited to the Soup Supper in the Church Dining Room at 5:30pm and to worship at 6:30pm, which will include communion and the imposition of Ashes. Receiving the ashes are a reminder of our humanity and mortality. Wearing the ashes reminds us that we belong to God, even in the broken places of human life. We receive the ashes with these words: You are dust and to dust you shall return.

Lenten Study – Sundays at 4pm

Prayers for All the Seasons of Our Lives—This year's Lenten Bible Study will focus on the Psalms – the great treasure house of prayer. Each Sunday at 4pm, beginning on February 14 and extending through Palm Sunday on March 20, Cynthia Campbell and Matt Nickel will lead reflections on how the psalms can help us find words for prayer in times of great joy and deepest loss. Each session will include prayer, song and reflection as we discover new resources for all the seasons of our lives.

