Always Near

Daily Moments with God

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O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue,
O Lord, you know it completely.
You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.

Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
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 139:1–10

JANUARY 1

ECCLESIASTES 3:1–13

Welcoming All Experiences

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.

Ecclesiastes 3:1

As a new year begins, the writer of Ecclesiastes invites us to consider the cyclical and balanced nature of life, in which a full range of human experiences finds a place and time. The author of this text is clear that there are times for joyous experiences like dancing, laughing, and building; and there are times for painful experiences like mourning, weeping, and tearing down.

In a world that seems to overvalue success and denigrate failure, this passage from Ecclesiastes provides a powerful corrective. God has made all experiences beautiful in their time, including those experiences we would rather escape. There are simply times when weeping is the only and most appropriate response. Our tears can be a beautiful testament to the heart's ability to express grief when what we've loved is lost.

As we begin a new year, may we welcome all the experiences awaiting us, embracing *both* joy and struggle as part of the beauty and gift of our lives.

God, help us to welcome all experiences into our lives knowing that you make all things beautiful in their time. Amen.

Laurie Milito

JANUARY 2

Isaiah 60:1–6

Seeing with New Eyes

Lift up your eyes and look around;
they all gather together, they come to you.

Isaiah 60:4a

To those in the darkness of the Babylonian exile, the prophet Isaiah spoke a powerful word of hope. Into the darkness of their fear and uncertainty, Isaiah proclaimed that the light of God's glory was rising.

Many of us live in our own modern-day exiles. We are abandoned by others, excluded from political systems, denied access to education, or cut off from our own bodies due to disability or illness. Into our thick darkness, we hear the distant voice of Isaiah proclaiming that the light of God's glory still rises.

This glory, though, can be easy to miss. Knowing this, Isaiah counseled his disheartened people to "lift up [their] eyes and look around." Seeing God's glory requires us to search beyond our own situations to find where God is at work. When we witness God's glory shining in the world around us, something wondrous happens: our hearts "shall thrill and rejoice" (v. 5). So lift your eyes and look around. What do you see?

Lord, help us to see your glory in others so that others may see your light in us. Amen.

Laurie Milito

JANUARY 3

EPHESIANS 3:8–12

Revealing the Wisdom of God

So that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known.

Ephesians 3:10a

It is through the church, Paul tells the Ephesians, that God's plan is worked out. Importantly, this plan requires rich variety. God's generous love flows through this assortment, expressing the wisdom of God to the world. Too often, however, we create a hierarchy of gifts and fail to appreciate the wisdom that flows from the least of these.

In one of my former congregations, there was a talented lay preacher whose wife was a brilliant musician. Their gifts were widely celebrated. Their only child, a sweet boy with developmental disabilities, often helped the greeters at the door on Sundays. When the family moved away, we mourned the loss of this talented couple. Many were surprised, however, to find themselves also mourning the loss of their young son, whose enthusiasm and smile at the church door warmed the hearts of all who entered. The wisdom of God expressed through this child was as significant as what God expressed through his parents' gifts.

God, thank you for the rich variety of gifts that allow your wisdom to be made known. Amen.

Laurie Milito

JANUARY 4

Acts 8:14–17

Hands of Blessing

Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

Acts 8:17

During their mission to Samaria, Peter and John prayed and laid hands on the new converts who had previously been baptized by Philip, and they received the Holy Spirit. By evangelizing to the Samaritans, an ethnic group historically at odds with the Jews, Peter and John gave us a model of a church eager to reach out to outsiders, following the Spirit's leading. We are reminded, once more, that the Holy Spirit is a Spirit of inclusion, unifying God's people across difference.

The children in my church are often the ones moved by the Spirit to reach across boundaries. For example, when one of our members with schizophrenia, "Sam," had trouble sitting still in the pew, they had an idea. They boxed up little puzzles and hung them in bags at the back of the church. When they noticed Sam becoming agitated, they would bring him a puzzle and work on it together. While adult members sometimes felt annoyed by Sam, the children's inclusiveness promoted a Spirit of loving acceptance.

God, may our churches be inspired by a spirit of inclusion and love as we share life together. Amen.

Laurie Milito

JANUARY 5

MATTHEW 2:1–6

Searching Hearts

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem.

Matthew 2:1

In search of a king, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem. These foreigners were not steeped in the teachings of the Torah. Rather, they received their divine direction from their study of the movement of the stars in the heavens. They were the original spiritual seekers, following the light without knowing its destination but open to its possibilities.

For those of us raised in the church and immersed in its teachings, our ability to wonder and seek after new epiphanies might be somewhat truncated. We seek revelation in our tradition but may be reluctant to also search our experience. Perhaps we need to set aside the doctrines to which we cling in order to again become simple seekers, willing to be led to the manger and open to what we might see there. For the magi and for us, it is the presence of Christ, not the knowledge of great religious truths, that finally satisfies our seeking hearts.

God of starlight, lead us to seek out your presence hidden in ordinary sight. Amen.

Laurie Milito

JANUARY 6

MATTHEW 2:7–12

Finding Another Way Home

And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Matthew 2:12

Following the star to where the Christ child was, the magi worshiped him. However, they soon learned that the promise embodied in this child did not remove the dangers of the world. In some ways, the danger was heightened. Warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, the magi had no choice but to find another way home.

The presence of Christ in our lives does not remove life's dangers either. I learned this for myself when I went into labor with my first child. Filled with the joy of new life, I was devastated when a long labor ended in stillbirth. As I left the hospital afterward, I could not go home in the same way. I was forever changed. I felt the poignancy and fragility of life in ways that woke me up to the blessing and promise of life itself. I would cherish the two children I went on to have in deeper ways than I might have otherwise.

God, help us to face life's dangers knowing the promise of your presence is unfailing. Amen.

Laurie Milito

JANUARY 7

LUKE 3:15–17, 21–22

Loved from the Start

And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Luke 3:22b

Baptism marked the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. In Luke, the Gospel writer was careful to point out that Jesus' baptism happened "when all the people were baptized" (v. 21). It is possible, then, to see Jesus' baptism as an act of solidarity with the people he was preparing to serve. At the river's edge, Jesus identified with the troubled and downtrodden as he would throughout his ministry.

Because Jesus identified with the common people, God declared his pleasure in the actions of his Son. That profound declaration of God's love propelled Jesus through the darkest moments of his life. It is a declaration we, too, make whenever we baptize in his name. Our life together in Christ has these twin blessings: we exist in community as one body of believers and we find our energy for service from the experience and joy of God's deep love for each one of us.

God of the journey, loved from the start, may we each find our purpose in loving others as you have loved us. Amen.

Laurie Milito

JANUARY 8

Hebrews 11:1–2

Extraordinary Faith

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

Hebrews 11:1

Hebrews 11 has been called the "faith chapter." In it, we discover some characteristics of extraordinary faith through the examples of some of the great men and women of the Bible. These faithful servants sought out and trusted God, and as a result, they pleased God and were rewarded for their faith. They approached God with obedience and perseverance and *by faith* received God's approval along with the strength to accomplish humanly impossible things.

There are many other stories of ordinary, nameless people in the Bible who had extraordinary faith in the face of their own overwhelming circumstances. A little Israelite maid had great courage. The healing miracles of Jesus show other characteristics of faith, including humility, persistence, penitence, expectation, and confidence. These faithful ones also sought out God, trusted God, pleased God, and *by faith* were rewarded with what they asked.

Our faith manifests itself in unique ways as well. Think of some of the characteristics of your faith. How is it extraordinary?

Strengthen our faith, O Lord, that we might please you more and more. Amen.

Xavia Arndt Sheffield

JANUARY 9

2 Kings 5:2–4

Courageous Faith

"If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy."

2 Kings 5:3

We are told only two things about this young girl: she was taken captive from the land of Israel by King Aram's army, and she became a slave to Naaman's wife. But in spite of her lowly status and insignificance, her eyes of faith perceived hope and the possibility that Naaman could be cured of his leprosy.

She had been taught about the healing God of Israel. She also knew of the prophet Elisha and how he had healed many. And she had tremendous courage in speaking up on behalf of her master. She believed God, through the prophet, would cure him. And when Naaman did what Elisha told him to do, "his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean" (v. 14).

We can have faith, but if we lack the courage to act on it, the power of faith remains hidden. What is the character of your faith—is it full of fear or courage?

Lord, give us courage to always trust you enough to act on our faith. Amen.

Xavia Arndt Sheffield

JANUARY 10

Matthew 8:5–13

Humble Faith

The centurion answered, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed."

Matthew 8:8

The centurion was not a follower of Jesus but an officer in the Roman army, a Gentile. He had a great need the day he approached Jesus, not for himself, but for his beloved servant, who lay paralyzed. When he asked for help, Jesus said he would go and cure him. But the centurion added that he was not worthy to have the Master enter his house. He believed Jesus could but speak the word and the servant would be healed from a distance.

One characteristic of this man's faith was humility. He confessed his unworthiness as well as his trust in the outcome. And Jesus put the emphasis on *his* faith with this amazing response: "Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith" (v. 10). After Jesus said to him, "'Go; let it be done for you according to your faith.' And the servant was healed in that hour" (v. 13).

Is humility one of the characteristics of your faith?

Lord, help us supplement our faith with true humility. Amen.

Xavia Arndt Sheffield

JANUARY 11

MATTHEW 15:21–28

Persistent Faith

Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon."

Matthew 15:22

This Canaanite mother was a Gentile. And if her faith was anything, it was persistent. She shouted to let people know of her dilemma. She knelt at Jesus' feet and begged him to rid her daughter of a demon. She engaged Jesus in an argument. She knew Jesus was the Messiah, and she knew the Messiah could heal her daughter. This was a mother's love in action.

Jesus ignored her at first, being harsh and even offensive in his response to her. But she would not be deterred. She argued that she, too, was somehow worthy of God's mercy, whatever Jesus' position. Her persistent faith brought about a reversal in Jesus, perhaps a preliminary sign of what was to come for the Gentiles, and Jesus answered her: "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish" (v. 28). Her daughter was healed instantly.

Is your faith persistent? Do you believe God's mercy is also for you?

Lord, help us have persistent faith to not give up on ourselves or on you. Amen.

Xavia Arndt Sheffield

JANUARY 12

LUKE 23:39–43

Penitent Faith

Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Luke 23:42

Most of the conversation in this story was between the two criminals who were crucified with Jesus. One cynically taunted Jesus and asked, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" (v. 39). But the other rebuked the first and said they deserved the sentence they were getting, but Jesus did not, because he had not done anything wrong. This dying man was acknowledging his own guilt and asking for forgiveness. He asked Jesus to remember him, and Jesus extended mercy to one of the wretched outcasts of that society.

Jesus' last words to another human being were the *assurance* of salvation. He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (v. 43). The penitent criminal was given far more than what he asked.

Jesus' answer tells us that we are also welcome in his kingdom, in spite of *our* sin. Does your faith carry with it the fear of God and the recognition of your need for penitence?

Help us, Lord, to confess our sin before you this day. Amen.

Xavia Arndt Sheffield

JANUARY 13

MARK 5:25–34

Expectant Faith

"If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well."

Mark 5:28

This woman had been suffering a long time and was sure that if she could just get close enough to Jesus to simply touch his clothes, she would be made well. She expected it. She didn't even have to face him or talk to him. She pushed her way through the crowd, touched Jesus' cloak, and was immediately healed.

Jesus sought out the one who touched the cloak. Jesus wanted to affirm her faith and did so by saying to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease" (v. 34). Jesus did not take the credit; instead, he said that her faith was the real source of her healing. And by calling her daughter, Jesus included her as a member of God's family.

Does your faith hold the expectation that God will heal you? Or do you come to God with a "maybe" or a "we'll see" attitude?

Lord, help us come to you with the expectation of your healing touch. Amen.

Xavia Arndt Sheffield

JANUARY 14

MATTHEW 9:27–31

Confident Faith

When he entered the house, the blind men came to him; and Jesus said to them, "Do you believe that I am able to do this?" They said to him, "Yes, Lord."

Matthew 9:28

In this story, we are introduced to two blind men as they followed Jesus, crying, "Have mercy on us, Son of David" (v. 27). This title shows that they recognized Jesus as the Messiah and that they had faith the Messiah could work miracles. When Jesus questioned them further by asking, "Do you believe that I am able to do this?" Without hesitation, they confidently replied, "Yes, Lord" (v. 28).

Healing the blind was one of the characteristic activities of Jesus and was interpreted as a messianic sign. In the Near East, eye diseases were as repulsive as leprosy, but in spite of this, Jesus' method of healing them was to touch their eyes. As Jesus did this, he said, "According to your faith let it be done to you" (v. 29). And their eyes were opened.

Confidence is a significant characteristic of faith. These two blind men had confidence in Jesus' power. And just as Jesus healed their eyes, he can also heal us wherever we need healing.

Lord, give us confident faith. Amen.

Xavia Arndt Sheffield

JANUARY 15

EPHESIANS 3:14–19

Hallowed Be Thy Name

I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit.

Ephesians 3:16

I am a Presbyterian, and when Presbyterians worship, we usually stand to sing and sit to pray and listen for God's word. We rarely kneel or "bow [our] knees before the Father," as the apostle Paul describes his posture toward the God of the universe (v. 14).

A few years ago, while forest fires raged in a nearby area, Christians in my city were invited to join with the Muslim community in prayer for rain. We gathered outside in a park, took off our shoes, and stood, kneeled, and bowed our heads on the dry grass of God's earth. I didn't understand the words that the imam prayed, but as I joined in the humbling postures of prayer, I comprehended in a new way the breadth and length and height and depth of the God of all people. I was in awe of the power of God's love to bring us together in prayer and concern for those who were in trouble.

Hallowed be your name, O God. May we be strengthened in our inner beings as we are rooted and grounded in your love. Amen.

Amanda Currie

JANUARY 16

PSALM 14:4–7

Thy Kingdom Come, Thy Will Be Done

Have they no knowledge, all the evildoers
who eat up my people as they eat bread?

Psalm 14:4

In today's psalm, the writer is despairing because of the injustice and suffering that he sees in his community. Oppressors are taking advantage of the poor, and "the evildoers . . . eat up my people as they eat bread."

We may relate to the psalmist's cry of despair when we observe the poor treatment of indigenous peoples throughout the world, the horror of human trafficking, or the persecution of so many people based on race, religion, gender, or sexual orientation. How long, O Lord?

The psalmist believes, however, that "God is with the company of the righteous" and that although many "would confound the plans of the poor, . . . the LORD is their refuge" (vv. 5–6). He looks toward a future in which the people will be delivered and they will rejoice!

We cannot give up in despair but must continue to pray and cooperate with God in building a world of peace, justice, and love for all people.

God of hope, thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as in heaven. Amen.

Amanda Currie

JANUARY 17

JOHN 6:1–14

Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread

Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted.

John 6:11

In an effort to improve my health, I've been counting calories. I have learned that I have access to more than enough bread and other foods. The challenge for me is not in getting enough but in avoiding eating too much! Of course, not everyone lives with such abundance, but most of those reading this devotional will probably admit that they have plenty.

And yet we often act as if resources are scarce. We worry about the future and hoard what we have "just in case." When we see people in need, we are hesitant to help, lest our resources be depleted.

The Gospel gives us the example of the boy with five loaves and two fish. He has some food (perhaps a little more than he needs), and he decides to share. As Jesus prays and passes it around, something happens, and it turns out to be more than enough.

Perhaps Jesus can do the same with our offerings. Certainly we have a little more than we need. So why not try?

Generous God, thank you for our daily bread. Help us to share with those who are hungry. Amen.

Amanda Currie

JANUARY 18

Psalm 14:1–3

Forgive Us Our Sins as We Forgive

They have all gone astray, they are all alike perverse.

Psalm 14:3

As people of faith, sometimes we observe our secular society and declare that our agnostic or atheistic neighbors are fools or corrupt sinners. Everyone around us seems to be living for their own wealth and pleasure. They do not care about God's law of love and mercy.

The psalmist reminds us today that even as we judge our neighbors, God judges us all. "The LORD looks down from heaven on humankind to see if there are any who are wise, who seek after God" but finds that we "have all gone astray, [we] are all alike perverse; there is no one who does good, no, not one" (vv. 2–3).

The good news is that God's grace and mercy is for every one of us; that in Jesus Christ, we are forgiven; and that by the Holy Spirit, we are empowered to love and begin to do some good. Remembering the psalm, can we choose to show the same mercy, love, and patience to others that God shows to us?

Forgiving God, we are so grateful for your mercy. Give us the grace to love and forgive others in your way. Amen.

Amanda Currie

JANUARY 19

2 Samuel 11:1–5

Lead Us Not into Temptation

So David sent messengers to get her, and she came to him, and he lay with her.

2 Samuel 11:4

When I think about temptation, I think of that inner struggle when we know that an action is wrong but we are tempted by our desire for comfort, pleasure, or power to do it anyway. What strikes me about King David's temptation to sleep with Bathsheba is that he doesn't seem to struggle against his sexual appetite. As soon as he notices the beautiful woman, he decides that he should have her. He doesn't think about her desires or marital status at all.

Most of us recognize adultery as wrong. But what are the temptations that we succumb to regularly because we do not consider the consequences of our actions? Does our goal of finding the best deal on products we buy contribute to the suffering of underpaid workers in the local store or a faraway country? Does our desire for the comfort and convenience of a gas-guzzling vehicle impact the future of our planet and generations to come?

God of justice and love, help us to examine our goals and our actions so that we are not led into temptation but into your ways of goodness and grace. Amen.

Amanda Currie

JANUARY 20

2 Samuel 11:6–15

Deliver Us from Evil

"Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, so that he may be struck down and die."

2 Samuel 11:15

King David got another man's wife pregnant, so naturally, he tried to cover it up. If Uriah thought the child was his own, David would be off the hook. But no matter what he tried, he couldn't get Uriah to come home from battle to sleep with his wife. He decided his only option was to send Uriah out into the worst of the fighting so that he would be killed.

Can you think of anything else David could have done? Would admitting his wrongdoing be a possibility? It's easy for us to say. We can't even imagine doing something as evil as what David did to Bathsheba and Uriah.

But we also make mistakes and do wrong things. We hurt one another by our actions or inactions. It can be just as difficult for us to admit what we have done and deal with the consequences. Trying to cover it up will only dig us deeper into the pit of our misdeeds. We need the courage to choose another way.

God of grace, deliver us from evil. Give us the courage to humble ourselves, admit our sin, and begin the process of healing and reconciliation. Amen.

Amanda Currie

JANUARY 21

EPHESIANS 3:20–21

Thine Is the Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory

To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever.

Ephesians 3:21

I am a pretty competent person and not bad at my job of being a minister. Like others who share their gifts in the church's ministry, I receive a fair amount of thanks and praise for what I do. Although the encouragement is wonderful, I have to be careful not to start thinking that I am actually worthy of such praise! Without the Spirit's gifting and God's help, neither I, nor you, would be able to accomplish anything in our ministries. That means that the glory must go to God.

If you are doing what you do (preaching or hospitality or evangelism or teaching or prayer) through your own strength and competence, then you can do more! Ask for God's help. Look for God's direction. Let the Spirit of God fill you, and remember what the apostle Paul tells us—that God, by the Spirit's power, "is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine" (v. 20).

Awesome God, to you be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations. Yours is the kingdom, the power, and the glory. Amen.

Amanda Currie

JANUARY 22

Luke 3:1–2

God's in the Details

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea . . . the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

Luke 3:1–2

As I work among people in our care community who are losing their ability to see, hear, remember, walk, use their hands, I imagine it could seem like a small jump for these friends to then think that God has forgotten them. I can't tell you how often I've been asked by those I serve in long-term care: "Why am I still here?" Their cries echo the Good Friday cry of Christ, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Ps. 22:1).

Today's often-skipped-over verses in Luke set the advent of Christ in an exact context of history. As Luke names names, he reminds us that God does not come to us in general but in the real details of our lives. The good news is that God cares and seeks to break into our real time and even our very own experiences of suffering.

Thank you for caring for us by name, God of grace. Prepare us to find you in the cries of our lives. Amen.

Andrew Yee

JANUARY 23

Luke 3:3–4

Transformed by Forgiveness

> *As it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,*
> *"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:*
> *'Prepare the way of the Lord,*
> *make his paths straight.'"*
>
> Luke 3:4

When I was twenty-one years old, I attended a company party and was served cognac. Not liking the taste, I drank it mainly to get rid of it. But my boss kept pouring more into my glass. The alcohol hit me as I walked to my grandmother's apartment to stay the night, and I felt worse as the night wore on. Finally, I threw up all over my grandmother's couch. Knowing that I was embarrassed and sick and that I had learned an important lesson, my grandmother helped me clean up and gave me some Sprite to help calm my stomach. She never mentioned the incident to anyone.

The forgiveness my grandmother showed me that night will forever stay with me. I know that the patience and restraint I find to keep from rubbing things in people's noses comes from my grandmother and that experience. I'm so grateful for her forgiveness and love.

Forgiving God, prepare our hearts so that, being honest about our brokenness, we might be fertile enough to find joy in your forgiveness! Amen.

Andrew Yee

JANUARY 24

Luke 3:5–6

The Joy of Finding Equality

"Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

Luke 3:5–6

What a bold statement! So how *really* will "all flesh" see God's salvation? When I look at our world, I see a lot of people who don't feel the least bit saved. Someone dies of hunger every few seconds—do they feel saved? How about those who can never seem to escape financial debt—do they feel saved? What about people of color, Muslims, and LGBTQIA people whom some insist on scapegoating for the ills of the world—do they feel saved?

Might our focus verses today suggest that God's salvation somehow includes us seeing each other and the world with some kind of equality? The cross showed how blind we can be in this world when only some feel more blessed, more powerful, or more chosen. Maybe if we can learn to see everyone as a valuable child of God, we can take a genuine step closer to all flesh seeing God's salvation.

God of all, may each small action we do in the way of Christ prepare us to see how you intend to save us. Amen.

Andrew Yee

JANUARY 25

MALACHI 3:1–4

Now Is the Time to Prepare

He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness.

Malachi 3:3

When my grandmother passed away recently, I felt so grateful for all she had taught me in spite of our language barrier. (She knew very little English, and I knew very little Chinese.) My grandmother possessed an incredibly strong faith. She saw opportunities to live in faith in the midst of brokenness, found ways to feed people during times of famine, prayed with her frightened daughter during invasions and wars, and raised three insightful children alone after my grandfather's premature death.

As I reflect in gratitude on how she influenced me to be who I am today, I also realize the importance of our earthly time. We are not meant to just wait for a heavenly afterlife. Every gifted moment and circumstance is an opportunity to be refined and purified to live in God's righteousness. Unless we practice generosity now, can we ever know the generosity of heaven? Unless we practice forgiveness now, can we ever hope to know the radical forgiveness of God?

Great Purifier, refine and purify us now so that we might realize even greater beauty. Amen.

Andrew Yee

JANUARY 26

PHILIPPIANS 1:3–11

Preparing to Live in Grace

For all of you share in God's grace with me.
Philippians 1:7b

Do you ever have trouble receiving gifts freely, instead feeling urges to give a gift in return? This propensity highlights a culture not based on free receiving but on payment and debt. It's not easy to receive freely. American culture, in particular, encourages independence and self-reliance—considering us failures if we are anything less than that. No wonder it is so difficult for people coming into our nursing homes to start receiving help that they might need, when all their lives they've been the cooks, the drivers, the caregivers, and the difference makers.

Christ invites us to a different life, as Paul shares here, to a life not of payment and debt but of God's grace. Can we imagine a life where we might encourage and allow our caregivers to live out their call and where we receive their offerings to us as grace? Verse 6 reminds us that God created us to practice a life of grace, both freely giving and receiving, until our time is finished and complete.

Gracious God, forgive our tendency to focus on debts so that we might live lives of grace. Amen.

Andrew Yee

JANUARY 27

John 19:26–27

Preparing Our Hearts for Something Bigger

When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son."

John 19:26

Chuck lost his wife of sixty-five years a few months ago. As you can imagine, he experienced tremendous grief, pain, and alienation. The grief seemed to consume his life. Later he also felt guilt at even considering moving on to some sort of happier existence.

When Jesus was dying on the cross and said one of his last words to his mother and his beloved disciple, what if he didn't really mean to emphasize a break in their relationship as much as to commend his mother to something larger? Yes, she was his mother, but he didn't own her—she belonged to their Creator. Yes, he cared for her, but he was giving that responsibility to someone who could do it better. Yes, he loved his mother—and maybe this commending was the best way to love her within his new circumstances.

God of life, even in the midst of times of grief, prepare our hearts to imagine Advent hope! Amen.

Andrew Yee

JANUARY 28

PSALM 139:1–18

Preparing to See a Person

O LORD, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.

Psalm 139:1–3

As my own dad's Alzheimer's progresses, I realize that each of us can be consumed with loss. Alzheimer's talk always seems to focus on loss of brain function, and we frequently say, "He is only a shell of who he used to be."

Our challenge today might be to stop thinking about loss for a moment as we ask: Are we more than our ability to think? Does our memory loss lessen God's love for us and God's desire to know us intimately?

Jesus consistently displayed an amazing ability to see the person behind whatever losses he or she had experienced. I want to live like Jesus lived—to not let the losses get in the way of me having a relationship with my dad and the chance to know him in a different way. I may not be able to cure my dad's disease, but I *can* value him truly.

Omniscient God, in our fascination to know disease, prepare our hearts to really know and see the person going through the disease. Amen.

Andrew Yee

JANUARY 29

MICAH 6:1–8

The Gift of Humility

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

Micah 6:8

Giving a gift can be a way of demonstrating appreciation to those we love. A gift can also be an expression of guilty regret for wrongdoing. For example, we may bring flowers as an act of reconciliation with someone we have wronged.

In today's text, Micah speaks to a people who believe the greatest gift they have to offer is their possessions. Burnt offerings? Young calves? Thousands of rams? (vv. 6–7). It seems there is nothing they aren't willing to sacrifice in payment for their wrongdoing.

However, what God asks in exchange for their transgressions is a willingness to live life in a new way. This way of life calls them away from patterns of injustice and pride to a life of justice and humility. Nothing—literally, no *thing*—can take the place of these gifts in the eyes of our God.

O God, may I offer you the gifts of doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly. Amen.

Kathy Wolf Reed

JANUARY 30

MATTHEW 5:1–12

Humbled in Our Mourning

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."

Matthew 5:4

The experience of grief has the power to humble even the greatest among us. When we mourn the loss of a life, job, or marriage, we experience a loss of control in our lives. Grief can feel like standing in the ocean. At times, our feet are firmly planted in the sand and we feel grounded. Then a wave comes crashing in and drags the sands out from under us.

Jesus knew what it meant to mourn. He wept over the death of his friend Lazarus. He cried out to God from the cross. It is this same Jesus who preaches and promises, in Matthew's Gospel, that those who mourn will receive comfort from a God who, in all humility, stands with us in our pain.

Dear Jesus, be with us as we face our grief. Amen.

Kathy Wolf Reed

JANUARY 31

1 Corinthians 1:18–31

Strength in Humility

But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.

1 Corinthians 1:27

So much of what Jesus showed us about God seems counterintuitive. The faithful of Jesus' day waited for the King of Kings to enter into their midst and certainly didn't expect this king to make his entrance in a lowly stable. As Jesus' ministry unfolded, many assumed he would assert his power with force. Instead, they encountered a servant Lord who preached about peace.

The gospel of Jesus Christ continues to challenge each of us to consider new definitions of what it means to be powerful, strong, and wise. Worshiping a God who calls us to identify our weaknesses, rely on grace, and pray for those who persecute us may seem like foolishness. But for those who have heard the good news of Christ's love for us, we discover daily the strength that comes from a life of humble servanthood.

May I find true strength by humbling myself before you and others. Amen.

Kathy Wolf Reed

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